



ELEPHANT KINGDOM

ELICK PREPARATORY SCHOOL  
NAINITAL



# ELEPHANT KINGDOM

by  
H. N. MARSHALL

ILLUSTRATED  
BUCK PREPARATORY SCHOOL  
NAINI TAL

London  
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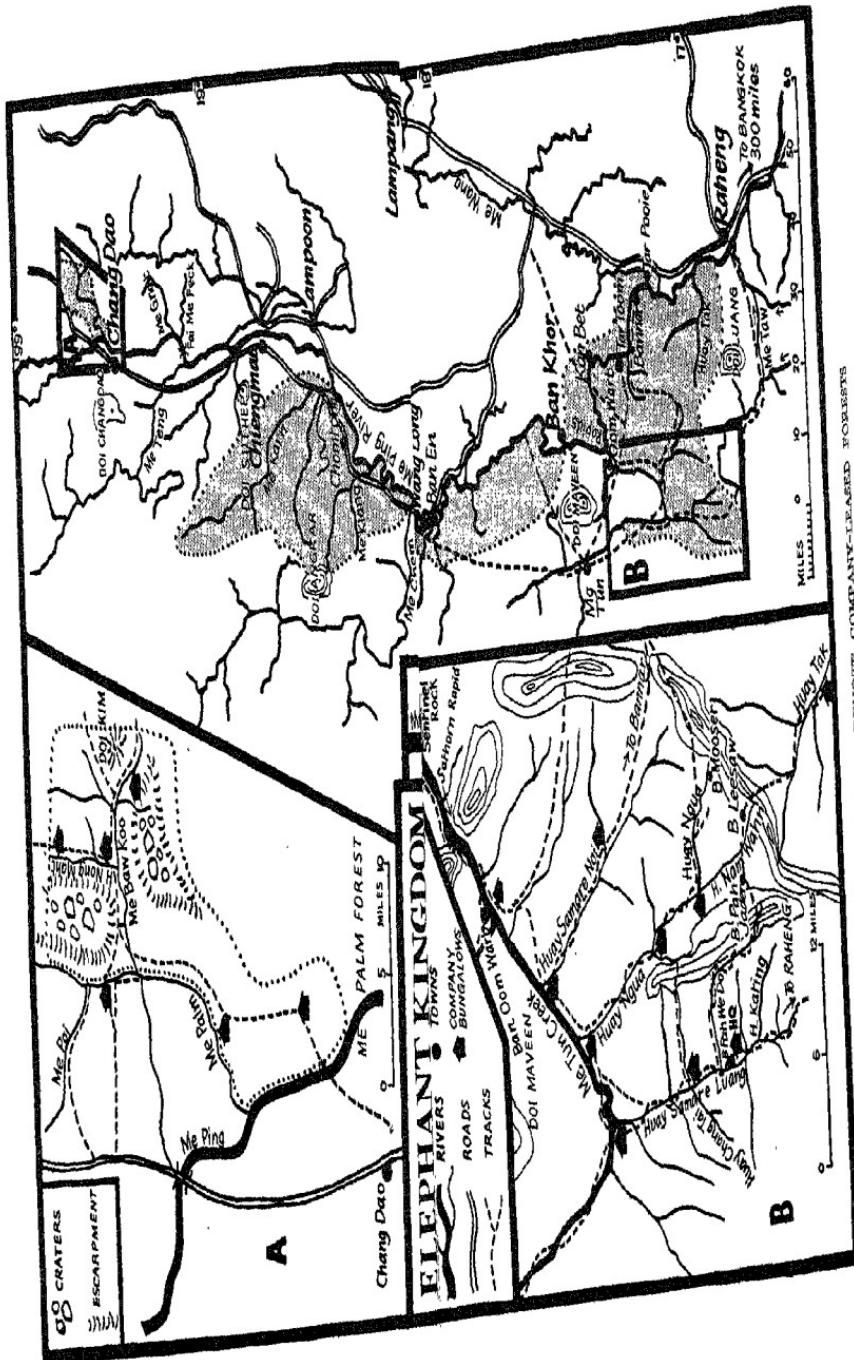
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SHADED AREAS DENOTE COMPANY LINE

DEDICATED TO  
MY WIFE MORFORWYN  
WHO WAS THERE

## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK was conceived one evening in the jungle, fifty miles from anywhere, as my wife and I sat before a waning camp-fire with an infant son sleeping peacefully in a bamboo shack nearby.

It is a personal account covering the seven years which I spent as a member of that exclusive and now almost extinct breed of men—the European teak wallah. With the closure of Burmese teak forests to British firms and the gradual nationalization of the Siamese ones the European is gradually vanishing from the jungle scene.

The introduction of other teak wallah personalities is kept to a minimum; not from any sense of inflated ego on my part, but rather from an appreciation of their innate modesty. They were men who did things, strange and wonderful things often, but not men much given to publicizing their doings as a rule.

They will be the sternest critics of this book and should it earn their approval, which will doubtless be delivered in terms of opprobrium and scorn as is their fashion, I shall be well pleased.

The development of this industry is inextricably linked with British timber firms and British forest officers, who put the working on a scientific basis for the Siamese in the late nineteenth century, and these men can feel proud of their contribution to the economic life of Siam.

The teak industry conducted in wild and inaccessible jungles with the help of vast herds of elephants, the heroes and sometimes the villains of the piece, suggests glamour and adventure and, to be sure, there was a measure of both. But more, much more, there was an abundance of slogging hard work often in steaming wet monsoon weather, with a splendid feeling of achievement as the main reward.

Here then, is my own version of it all.



## CHAPTER ONE

### EASTWARD BOUND

I LEFT London Airport on a sleety cold day in March 1950 and stepped out of the Constellation airliner almost two days later into the furnace heat of Bangkok to start on my new career. I was bound for the northern jungles of Siam to become a teak wallah and had only the haziest idea of what was in store. At that time the name Siam conjured up little beyond fanciful visions of exotic court life, ornate temples and yellow robed Buddhist priests, legendary white elephants and all the mysteries of the East generally.

After a leisurely Customs and Immigration check I emerged from the "Passengers Only" area to survey the assembled throng for a face, showing some curiosity in regard to myself, which would prove to belong to the Company representative, sent to shepherd the new boy in the right direction. A lengthy survey of immaculate but indifferent Europeans, voluble night-shirted Indians surrounded by mountains of baggage and hordes of relatives, and dapper, inscrutable Asiatics of many nations convinced me that my arrival had caused rather less stir than the smallest frog in the largest pond.

It seemed incumbent on me to make some move for my own salvation and, accordingly, I boarded a blue Thai Airways bus leaving Don Muang Airport for a fascinating, if somewhat hair-raising, early morning ride into Bangkok, some fifteen miles away. The long straight road speared its way through endless stretches of parched rice fields to the outskirts of the capital city, Bangkok, which is bulging at the seams with humanity. A gay and colourful race of people ever willing to laugh and joke and put off the work in hand until tomorrow.

We passed big open-air markets selling vegetables brought in fresh from the fields that day by village women, who had started out long before dawn, each carrying two loaded baskets slung at the ends of a carrying pole. We passed roadside canals alive with small canoes skimming through the lotus leaves, and open-fronted wooden shops purveying a tremendous variety of brightly coloured, highly scented goods.

The bus driver indulged in an animated conversation with his passengers. He was obviously illustrating some sensational event which required that he face the rear for seconds at a time whilst illustrating the happenings with emphatic gestures from both hands. His performance with "eyes front" and both hands on the wheel was sensational and I became convinced that his instincts were those of a frustrated racing driver hell bent on scaring on-coming traffic off the road. Time and again a collision seemed inevitable but didn't somehow occur. In fact the opposition seemed to be driving with equal nerve, verve and possibly skill.

My impressions, formed on this ride, needed little revision during the years; they were that the Siamese drive hell-bent, flat out if possible, and with a fatalistic certainty that nothing will be approaching round the next blind corner. I am certain that but for the excellent reflexes and innate good manners of the majority of drivers the road casualties in Siam would be catastrophic.

Our driver kept his vehicle upright and moving through the traffic on New Road, the main artery of the business district, where the driving hazards are rated by many as the world's worst, until we were able to turn off to our destination, the Trocadero Hotel. This hotel is known the world over as one of those international caravanserai where globe trotters, travellers, and local business men with a thirst congregate. Trying to get a room there at short notice was like trying to pull hen's teeth—difficult, but I was saved at the eleventh hour by the long overdue arrival of the Company representative, who whisked me away to the Company Mess, where introductions to the bachelor members of the staff were performed.

They were a young and high-spirited group and more than willing to make the arrival of a new chum an excuse for a succession of parties to the city's numerous night haunts, resulting in the sun rising each morning through an alcoholic haze.

In amongst the social round, the serious business of getting myself ready for "Export to Upcountry" was going on, with innumerable visits to Government Departments, many of which seemed to be housed in dilapidated palaces, to arrange residence permits, police identity cards and sundry details. Here one received courteous and prompt attention from the Siamese officials and left with the impression that one was welcomed as a resident in the country.

My short stay in Bangkok passed pleasantly and just before

entraining for the north, I learnt that the reason for my speedy despatch to the Far East was the result of urgent cables from the Forest Manager for more staff to cope with the opening of large new forest areas.

With the prospect of arduous toil seeming imminent, my speculations as to the work I was heading for became more intense and, as my only source of information about Up-Country was the incredible ideas of our Bangkok Junior staff which ran to tigers behind every bush and Oriental Dorothy Lamours swinging in every tree, I boarded the Northern Express completely full of good cheer and wrong impressions.

Endless, dry, monotonous rice plains flashed by until darkness fell, when I retired to a sleeping compartment, which I shared with a Siamese Army Officer, and conversed amicably in broken, almost shattered, English. Sips of his freely proffered Me Rong (Siamese whisky of which "Not a drop is sold until it is three weeks old") filled in the conversational gaps until bedtime. Next morning the scenery was in complete contrast to that of the previous evening. We were obviously leaving the Bangkok plain and approaching the hills of the North. Small cultivated patches along the side of the railway were interspersed amongst large forests tracts, with trees and dense vegetation coming right down to the broad firebelt which held back the jungle on both sides of the railway.

Soon we were on the first hill section and snaking around the contours on the long gradient to the top, with the wood-burning locomotive inundating everything under a pall of soot and cinders. Once at the summit we had a distant prospect of range after range of unbroken jungle, green foreground fading into blue distance, before the downhill rush cut off all but the immediate jungle walls bordering the track, until we emerged on the edge of a swift, rocky, mountain stream running north with the railway to join the large Me Wang creek at Lampang.

Lampang is one of the most important Northern, or Lao, cities occupying, as it has done for centuries, a strategic site on the crossroads of the trade routes linking Burma, Siam and Indo-China; and we stopped there to take on wood and water for the snorting beast at the head of the train, in readiness for its assault on the next and major hill section. Before us over the main range of hills and five hours distant was the terminus, and my destination, Chiengmai. This ancient walled and moated city is capital of the north and was once the centre of an independent Lao state which recognized allegiance to the

Siamese crown in the form of yearly token payments of gold and silver ornaments. Its other claims to fame are that the most beautiful women in a country of beautiful women hail from there, and it is the centre of the teak industry.

Further thought on this romantic city was diverted by the wild and rugged scenery through which we were passing. The train hugged the hillside, occasionally crossing spidery, precarious-looking wooden trestle bridges to give one a view of the small Me Tarn stream meandering almost a hundred vertical feet below us. Near the top of this long steep gradient the train ran into the Khun Tarn tunnel (about one mile in length and the longest in Siam) and on emerging we were immediately in the small station of the same name which has the distinction of being the highest in the country.

The altitude here proves very favourable to rose cultivation and this, together with orchids gathered from the surrounding jungle, proved a profitable sideline for the market women whose main venture, as in all stations along the line, was the sale of food to passengers not wishing to avail themselves of the dining-car facilities—fried chicken legs yellowed with saffron, diced pineapple on sticks, rice and curried meats wrapped in fresh banana leaves, various sticky confections and a never-ending variety of vividly coloured cordials.

During our halt there, some travellers walked back the short distance to the mouth of the tunnel and made devotional offerings at the miniature shrine. This shrine, only the size of a small table top, was covered by a steep, temple style roof. It was filled with small replicas of Buddha images and sacred elephants and was dedicated to the Spirit of the Tunnel. Passengers having emerged from the tunnel lighted sticks of incense at the front of the small building in thanks for their safe arrival from the Powers of Darkness; those waiting to go through the tunnel on the southbound train made similar offerings coupled with the fervent wish that the tunnel would not collapse whilst they were in it!

The descent from Khun Tarn brought us into the Chiengmai plain; several hundred square miles of rich rice land formed from the alluvial bed of a prehistoric lake which had, over many thousands of years, eroded an outlet through the Western end of the mountain range which the train had just crossed, to release its waters into the Bangkok plain.

The line spiralled down into the lowlands, through the ancient walled city of Lampoon, and across emerald green paddy

land, where plentiful water allowed two crops a year to be grown. With the approach to Chiengmai small outlying villages became more frequent—beautifully sited amongst coconut groves with the red-tiled roof tops half hidden by feathery clumps of bamboo—and finally Chiengmai itself with its lines of rice godowns lining the approach to the enormously long covered platform.

With the thought that the Forest Manager had got his urgently needed help at last, and the hope that he would not look too askance at his new assistant, I hopped off the train wearing my most efficient air. I needn't have worried—he wasn't there, but the Assistant Manager was and we introduced ourselves with a minimum of ceremony, but keen interest nevertheless; he probably wondering whether the latest offering from U.K. would ever justify the expense of his passage money out and I hoping that he would be as reasonable to work under as first impressions suggested.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ELEPHANT REST CAMPS

MY ARRIVAL in Chiengmai coincided with the slack period which followed the end of Annual Accounts and preceded the onset of the rains, when the next felling season would start. There was however one big chore reserved for this period, namely the visit to elephant rest camps for the yearly inoculation of animals against disease, and I was ordered to go with the Assistant Manager on this task by way of an introduction to the forest life.

The frenzied routine of packing jungle kit, tents, stores and camp furniture was left largely to the newly hired No. 1 boy who, after twenty-five years of experience in these matters, luckily needed little guidance from his bewildered "Nai". Early one April morning buses, resembling open-sided cattle trucks, arrived in the compound and were duly loaded by shouting coolies. Everyone gave orders, no one obeyed any of the wildly contradictory directions, but somehow the job was finished quickly and to everyone's satisfaction.

Our destination was seventy miles north by road, then twenty miles into the jungle where part of the Company herd was resting in the evergreen headwaters of the Me Fang creek. The waters of this creek flowed north out of Siam, into the giant Me Kong River and thence more than a thousand miles to reach the sea at Saigon, in the South China Sea.

Our passage through the city of Chiengmai was circumspect enough with frequent stops to buy things the cook had previously forgotten. Once through the crumbling city wall and across the moat at the old North Gate, however, we were in open country on unsurfaced earth roads and being treated to the no hands, no nerves, no brakes style of driving which was to be such a feature of my many road journeys in Siam.

We crossed the edge of the Chiengmai plain, then up into the Chiengdao gorge with the road cut out of the hillside on our left and falling away sharply on the right down to the Me Ping River, which reflected a lovely green from the overhanging foliage.

Once through the gorge we stopped at Ban Chieng Dao, a small country village which is completely dominated by the gigantic mass of Doi Chieng Dao. This freak geological formation of limestone rises almost a sheer six thousand feet out of the plain to a height of more than seven thousand feet above sea level and provides the energetic botanist with some rare alpine flora near its summit. My coolies resolutely turned their backs on this natural wonder and tucked into a mountainous, if belated, breakfast of rice, fried pork and fiery hot chilis before we moved on.

Our swaying chariot, with a latterday Jehu at the wheel, took us through another rice plain then into more rugged country, into the very heart of our leased teak forests. With an airy wave of his hand the A.M. said, "There's where you'll be working next season." "There" was a sawtooth range of hills with a fantastic skyline of turrets, spires and crenellations and just about the most difficult country in sight.

The jumping-off point for the elephant camps lay much further north, however, and soon we were climbing out of the Me Ping watershed with the road, cut out of deep-red laterite soil, indulging in a continuous series of blind hairpin bends as it climbed to the divide. The bus, with the driver playing tunes on an outsize horn, bucketted along the unsurfaced road leaving a dense train of dust in its wake which hung motionless in the still air, and it was with a feeling of some relief on my part that we eventually made the summit. All the country behind us drained down through Siam to the Gulf of Siam, whilst the country before us sent its water through Indo-China to the China Sea.

Our ride down towards the Me Fang stream was equally tortuous but with much easier gradients, and soon we pulled up at the small bamboo and attap village of Ban Me Kam Pom, which was our destination. Here we were met by a heavily tattooed Kamoo, dressed in the standard jungle garb of knee-length Shan trousers and a jacket made from blue native cloth, who said that he had been sent to guide us to the Company encampment.

The elephants which were to transport our kit were waiting in the jungle nearby and a man was sent to call them. My first sight of real elephants (I always think of circus ones as the tailors' dummies of the breed) was one which will be evergreen in my memory.

Six huge beasts swayed along in single file through the tall

trees in the middle distance, then descended into the ten-foot-high elephant grass which filled the valley at our feet. There only the riders' heads and the saddletops were visible as the animals ploughed through the feathery white seed plumes and saw-edged leaves, until they emerged at last on to the road. The four leading animals were tuskers with metal bells clanging at their throats whilst two noticeably smaller females, wearing wooden clappers in place of bells, brought up the rear. Each animal had a mahout perched forward of the neck on the rounded boss of enormously thick bone which protected the brain, and these men, with words of command and directions conveyed by foot movements behind the ear, brought the animals to a halt by our buses.

The transport saddles, huge structures of teak struts resting on about six layers of soft padding on top of the animals' backs, were quickly filled by highly vocal coolies whilst the elephants affected complete indifference to the antics of mere mortals. Then, after a final tightening of all harness, to guard against slipped saddles, the animals turned once again into the elephant grass with the mahouts moving like animated puppets as they administered vigorous barefoot kicks behind their charges' ears to get the convoy under way. "Vigorous barefoot kicks" may sound like a vicious form of exercise but, considering the respective sizes of the combatants, their effect might be likened to the gentlest of caresses.

After seeing the buses off on the return trip to Chiengmai we followed in the wake of the coolies, who were carrying super-breakable objects like lamps and crockery in bamboo baskets, along the track opened up by the elephants.

We soon passed the lumbering animals, which travel much slower than men, and sloshed ahead up the stream-bed towards the blue-distant headwater hills. After ten miles, four hours' walk at the plodding jungle pace, the A.M. stopped in a riverside grove of bamboo and declared that we would camp there till next day. Though ten miles may sound little enough, this distance in the tropics along paths only so-called from extreme courtesy, is a very different form of exercise from a similar distance along English country lanes, and I was glad enough to fall in with his suggestion.

Being several hours ahead of the elephants we had plenty of time to start my education in things Far Eastern, which do not appear in the guide books, and particularly in elephant and jungle lore. My guide and mentor, after many years in the

jungles of Burma and Siam, was well fitted for the part and I have always considered him to be in the first rank of those Britishers who make their specialized careers in the jungles of the Far East, and have been duly grateful that my first tutor was one who knew what was what and, moreover, why.

Almost the first thing I learnt was that our halt was out of no tender solicitude for my well-being, but was considered sufficient mileage for the elephants for that day. This then was my introduction to that first and cardinal rule in teak working—that everything is subordinated to the health, well being and capacity of that paragon amongst animals, the Indian working elephant.

As rest camps were our immediate concern the discussion naturally turned in that direction and I learnt much about the habits, feeding and treatment of elephants that helped me understand the routine when we arrived in rest camps.

For the reader then, together with some of my own observations over seven years, here is a brief appreciation of the Indian elephant, the hero and sometimes the villain of the piece.

The elephant is the largest land animal alive, the Indian being rather smaller than the African variety, and its vast size and weird shape give it a unique place in the animal kingdom. It is a shade-loving animal which in the wild state asks nothing better than to graze quietly all day, and a large part of the night, amongst favoured types of fodder with ample water and cooling mud nearby. It sleeps only a few hours each night, usually towards dawn, and only then after its phenomenal senses of hearing and smell have assured it that there is no danger from tiger attack. Being gregarious it lives in a herd, moving from one grazing ground to another under the herd leader, often an old and cunning female. It shares in the defence of the calves, which are the collective responsibility of the whole herd.

In the captive state much of this is changed, particularly where calves are involved. In a working herd there are few blood ties since the beasts are collected from widely different areas, so the defence of the calves is of little interest to the tuskers and the anti-tiger patrol is usually shared by the mother and an "Aunty" who teams up with the parent shortly before a calf is born.

The working herd is formed either by buying adult trained

animals, by training of Company calves or by the capture and training of young wild elephants. This latter method is not common in Siam and the Company herd was a mixture of the first two types.

The sexes are usually easy to differentiate, being generally tusked male and tuskless female. Occasionally males are born with only one tusk, sometimes completely tuskless, and in these cases the trunk develops, by way of compensation, into an even more formidable appendage than the incredibly powerful proboscis attached to a normal animal.

A full grown tusker stands between 7 ft. 9 in. and 9 ft. at the shoulder, has a slatey-grey hide scattered with stiff black bristle and weighs somewhere between three and four tons. In his pride and massive dignity he is unquestionably the King of the Jungle. The female is tuskless, though small tusks up to six inches long may appear, and smaller all round than her lord and master. A tall one may reach 8 ft. 6 in. at the shoulder and tip the scales at a very useful two and a half to three tons.

It is axiomatic that the nearer a captive animal's living conditions can approximate to those of its wild cousin the fitter it will be and, accordingly, our animals were subject to a yearly routine. Starting in June the herd emerged from rest camps, moved to its allocated work, and carried on throughout the rains until late February when, with the hot weather moving in, they returned to rest camps for three months complete holiday.

During the working season the routine was split into six day periods. In each period an elephant worked four days and rested two; each working day being from about 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. or a little earlier. An easy calculation will show that in the course of twelve months an animal could work the equivalent of ninety eight-hour days—or, to put it another way, it had nine months holiday a year. Loss of condition or sickness would mean extra days off work so that only an animal in good condition could get in three months' work. Such being the case the cardinal rule stated earlier became logical, and punishments for mahouts' neglect which resulted in lost time were generally severe.

Well treated, however, an elephant is capable of getting through enormous amounts of work and performing near-impossible feats of strength. It makes the best use of its enormous weight and muscle power when pushing with its head or in dragging work where its thrust into dragging harness can

move dead weights of up to five tons. As a beast of burden it is poor, being able to bear only one tenth of its own weight in a back load, compared to a pack pony which will carry half its own weight all day and go twice as fast and far whilst doing it. For transport we reckoned one adult elephant equal to six of the small local ponies in weight-carrying capacity.

A comparison of respective strengths which seems to bear the test of experience shows the horse, weight for weight, to be 25 per cent stronger than a man, and a man to be 10 per cent stronger than an elephant, though in this comparison one must remember that an elephant comes in one large co-ordinated package and would achieve vastly more than an equal weight of horses working at cross purposes.

In its ability to go through almost impenetrable thickets, breaking a path for others to follow, and to climb all but the most precipitous of hills to reach the huge teak logs where they lie at widely scattered parent stumps, the elephant stands supreme. It is this ability to work in difficult country, moving logs weighing tons, which make it invaluable, and much more efficient than any machine yet invented for this specialized work. Without the working elephant it is safe to say that there would be no teak industry of any size.

In closing these general comments on elephants mention should be made of a rare but well-known type, the White Elephant. According to one's viewpoint, such a term denotes either something useless and unusable or an animal of very sacred associations with the Buddhist religion.

The former idea, a Western one, seems to be based on a romantic and probably fictitious story of Court life under the ancient kings of Siam. In those days of numerous concubines there were likewise numerous offspring and related hangers-on all hoping for some official state appointment with the attendant large income. The King was hard put to create sufficient titles to go round and at one period, to settle a very importunate office seeker, he created the post of Keeper of the Sacred Royal White Elephant. The Keeper Elect was made responsible for the care, feeding and costuming of the elephant, one keeper per elephant, and had to pay all expenses from his own purse. Since the ceremonial trappings were cloth of gold encrusted with jewels and the rest of the equipment on an equally lavish scale, a keeper soon found himself penniless though supporting a vast and useless animal—hence the term "white elephant".

The other, religious significance of the term is the only one

which is entertained in Buddhist countries and it seems to have arisen in the following manner.

In ancient times there was the belief that a white animal or bird housed the spirit of some enlightened being moving on his way to a higher plane of existence. The white elephant, due to its vast size, its intelligence and its position as king among beasts was, by analogy, the bearer of the spirit of some very great personage indeed and was credited with being the reincarnation of Lord Gautama Buddha in one of his earlier existences. As such it was greatly prized by the ruling kings of those times, as a symbol of divine power, and several wars were fought between Siam and Burma over the possession of these legendary animals.

A white elephant is an albino of the breed, lacking coloured pigment in the skin, and is in fact a salmon-pink hue, not white. To qualify as a sacred white elephant it is not enough that the skin is pinkish ; the tail has to be of a certain shape, the roof of the mouth and the hair bristles have to be white, the eye has to possess a pearly annulus and, very important, the toenails have to total twenty instead of the standard eighteen, and it has to be a male.

Obviously the number of animals born with all the qualifications is very small indeed and when, in olden times, one did appear the lucky owner became wealthy overnight, being showered with lavish gifts and patronage. His white animal was invested with a sacred aura and conducted to the royal palace with tremendous pomp, there to spend the rest of its life in ceremonial and pageantry.

It therefore caused a tremendous stir, even reaching the world Press, when a white elephant calf was born in 1926 in Chiengmai province to one of our company cow elephants. The little tusker, later to receive the holy name of Pra Sawat Kohadej-dilok, was marched into Chiengmai with a large escort of gaily caparisoned Company tuskers and was met at the northern gate of the old walled city by the ruling chief of Chiengmai. Its progress through the streets on the way to the Company compound was a triumphal procession with thousands of people turning out to fête the little animal.

This event occurred in the first year of the reign of King Chulalongkorn and it was considered a splendid omen portending a long and prosperous reign. To mark the occasion the King made the first ever visit by a ruling Siamese monarch to Chiengmai to view the new find and was duly presented with

the calf by the Forest Manager acting on behalf of the Company.

The occasion earned great merit for the Company in the eyes of the populace and when the Forest Manager later escorted mother and calf to Bangkok by train for the official royal reception, he was decorated with the Order of the White Elephant, one of Siam's highest awards, by the King for his unwitting part in the triumph.

This long digression, inspired by the conversation in a bamboo grove whilst we waited for our non-white, strictly functional elephants to appear, gives just a sketchy outline of that fascinating and regal animal, the Indian elephant.

Eventually the elephants arrived, rumbling with pleasure at the knowledge of another march ended, their flanks and bellies wet with cooling saliva which had been sucked from the mouth by the versatile trunk and squirted backwards on to the body. They were halted short of the camp and, with the habit of long training, relieved themselves there so as not to foul the camp-site.

Servants and coolies alike were eager to get camp pitched so that they too could enjoy a rest and worked with a will unloading saddles, exuberantly dropping my possessions from a height of eight feet or more. Tents went up with the dexterity of long practice, folding chairs, tables and campbeds materialized, bath water and a belated lunch began heating fraternally over a camp-fire and an aura of temporary civilization hung over the sylvan spot.

The evenings, there in the northernmost part of Siam, were cool or even distinctly cold and, with the sudden descent of the tropical night, intolerant of more than a very short spell of twilight, we moved our canvas long-chairs before a roaring camp-fire to yarn away several pleasant hours over a peg of whisky, followed by dinner and early bed.

Before dawn next morning a hurricane lamp wavered across the grass, a cup of tea was thrust through my mosquito net, emptied at a gulp and thrust out again. Then a hasty wash, and a struggle into bush jacket, shorts and boots whilst the coolies collapsed the tent round my ears and started lashing bundles into the smallest possible size ready for loading. Breakfast on the march, usually some unbelievably bad concoction of egg, was served with a flourish and eaten with bad grace and little appetite by lamplight.

It was not yet light, though greying in the east, when the

elephants were marched in for their morning bath. Normally with only ankle fetters to restrict their movements, some animals might cover several miles during a night's grazing and it was a great nuisance, when on the march, if one animal could not be found, as the whole convoy was held up. Whenever a move was planned for the next day, therefore, it was customary to tie the elephants.

Each animal was secured at the end of its long steel tying chain so that it could move in quite a large circle with fodder and water within reach. Extra fodder in the form of edible creepers, bamboo stems or grass was cut and placed nearby so that every elephant had access to about six hundred pounds of fodder—a night's ration. By this method the mahouts got their mounts into camp with a minimum of delay.

The soft clink of chains in the darkness heralded the arrival of the elephants, with their mahouts visible only as disembodied glowing cigarette ends ten feet in the air, then they could be heard splashing into the deep pool near camp. The order "mep", sit down, was repeated in louder and louder tones to animals that had no relish for the idea of sitting in cold water in a chilly dawn. Finally, and with varying degrees of reluctance, all the beasts were seated and in the grey light preceding dawn the shadowy figures of the mahouts could be seen capering about on the backs of their half-submerged charges scrubbing hard with lengths of soapy creeper.

Occasionally an animal submerged completely leaving only the tip of its trunk exposed to act as a breathing periscope, whilst an indignant mahout having received a gratuitous and often much needed bath would shower his animal with pebbles and invective. Finally with hides shining wetly black the elephants rose dripping and ponderous from the water, to be ridden away for saddling.

The layers of soft beaten bark, which had been left hanging from trees overnight to air, were smoothed on to the back to form an even cushion. With this in place the animal was once again made to sit and two men, bearing the heavy saddle between them, approached from behind and, after clambering up the animal's outstretched hind legs, placed the wooden cradle squarely on top of the padding. The animal then rose, with the mahout seated backwards on his mount clutching the saddle to prevent it sliding off, and the harness ropes were lashed in place. Loading commenced without delay so that we were able to vacate our camp site *en masse* at dawn.

Dawn is a lovely peaceful time of day in the jungle, but the crisp morning air was slightly jaundiced for me by the pungent blue smoke drifting back from the A.M.'s after-breakfast cheroot—a black and lethal-looking cigar. Our intention was to reach rest camps, ten miles further upstream, by midday—though the elephants would spend most of the day traversing the broken terrain.

The route hugged the stream which became narrower and rockier the while, with waterfalls and giant boulders adding variety to the muddy going and encroaching evergreen, which almost blocked the faint trail we were travelling. We made considerable height, with the rushing mountain stream dwindling in size as we climbed into the hills. We passed areas of dense, overgrown secondary jungle, the evidence of "shifting cultivation" practised by some tribe which had gone on its nomadic round years before, and soon after this saw camp-fire smoke rising ahead at a fork in the stream.

A group of men, the camp seniors, warned of our coming by some form of telepathy, advanced from the camp to meet us. Each man "wai'd" to the A.M., who greeted them with the usual query as to their health and well-being, then they saluted me in a similar manner, hands pressed together as if in prayer and bodies inclined half forward. My all-embracing fatuous grin was deemed adequate to the occasion. A short walk brought us to their bamboo and attap shacks, then on a little way to our own prepared camp-site, set in a shady grove of evergreen at a discreet distance from their encampment.

That evening the first of the routine checks started with each headman bringing his camp-book which showed a complete inventory of equipment in his care. These books were checked for faked entries then we strolled across to the collection of huts where the equipment was spread on the ground—heavy paired dragging chains, long thin tying chains, large-linked hobbles, tents, axes, saws, jungle knives, adzes, mattocks, crowbars, files, wedges, wire-ropes, buckets, cooking pots and all the other appurtenances of a self-contained jungle camp.

Then followed the check of rope and harness-gear which was renewed each year by the workmen, known as footmen, during the rest camp period. They had collected and shredded the inner bark of a common jungle tree, "mai paw", and were engaged on the intricate plaiting needed to produce the broad breast bands which were called on to withstand tons of strain during dragging operations.

That evening, considering that there were well over a hundred men living close by, seemed amazingly quiet until the A.M. explained that all the men were getting in double rations of sleep against the rigours of the mammoth beat-up which would follow pay-day. Earlier I had noticed a group of village women hanging about the camps; with the uncaring instinct of vultures for a feast several old crones, shepherding a number of very attractive maidens, had appeared to share in the wealth about to be distributed to the men.

They had several live pigs, some four-gallon tins of rice liquor (a potent cloudy brew of illicitly distilled hooch of which it could be claimed that "not a drop is sold till it's cold"), and trade goods such as cigarettes and the immensely popular sweetened condensed milk. Once money was in circulation all these would be translated into terms of an uproarious feast lasting for several days and nights and during the revels the maidens would certainly not be averse to supplementing their income with any personable youth who pleased them; a financial transaction reflecting no stigma on either party with these kindly, simple people.

Next morning pay started with the A.M. seated behind a table holding the wage sheets, which showed the credit due to each man, receipt forms and a stamping pad. The open steel cashbox crammed with neatly bundled notes rested on the ground between us and I was co-opted as receipt taker and cashier.

Each headman, in order of seniority, brought up his staff who squatted respectfully on their heels whilst the headman stood at the table detailing the virtues of those men deserving a pay increase in splendidly exaggerated terms and the vices of those to be dismissed with fervent indignation. His authority was supported by the acceptance of his opinions in almost every case.

As his name was called each man rose and came up to the table where he affixed his left thumb print on a receipt, bowed on receiving his money and retired to count it at leisure, assuming that he was able to count.

A goodly number of our jungle staff were illiterate Kamoos, men of a very hardy Indo-Chinese tribe, who came over the borders into Siam to form the backbone of the felling labour. They could neither read nor write and their left thumb print was taken on the basis that, as most men were right-handed, the dexter thumb might be too scarred to register clearly. Any

man who could write his name usually arrived at the table flourishing a pen, this being a mark of his social superiority. The thought crossed my mind that if there had ever to be a court case involving the authenticity of our collection of smudged thumb prints it would need most of the resources of Scotland Yard to sort the issue but, so far as I know, they have not once been challenged during the seventy years of our leases—an indirect but great tribute to the individual honesty of our European staff.

Pay, with the tedious task of guiding each spatulate and rebellious thumb to the correct receipt blank, occupied most of the morning, and, with the exception of a few disgruntled individuals who beat the table protesting that their miserly pay increase or non-existent bonus was due to personal spite on the headman's part, passed off sedately enough.

Some thirty-five elephants were resting in the headwaters of the Me Fang that hot weather, and during the afternoon and evening they were brought in close to camp to be ready for the big parade next day. The night resounded to the pistol crack of breaking bamboos, the swish and thump as great clumps of vegetation were uprooted then beaten on the ground to remove inedible soil and the digestive rumble of contented pachyderms performing their favourite task—eating; all interspersed with high-powered trumpeting supplied by some elephants in an unrehearsed off-beat harmony to the hollow, kettledrum thumps of others which beat their trunks on the ground to produce vibrations which carried for miles.

In the clear night air all this activity, some of it a mile away, sounded to be within a stone's throw of my tent and, added to the strangeness of my surroundings, conspired to give me an almost sleepless night.

Early next morning the assorted noises of elephants moving in goodly numbers penetrated my tent and I emerged to see our herd being ridden into various pools along the river. Once more the bathing routine started but this time it was a prolonged and thorough one, so that each animal could arrive for inspection in the most immaculate condition possible. "Kua Mar Bar", the Mad Dog creeper, so named, I think, because its twisting growth suggests the contortions of a dog in the throes of rabies, was copiously applied until each animal was streaked with heavy white suds. Toe-nails and tusks were polished until shiny, ears and tail were groomed, then the animal was ridden into a shaded grassy patch to wait. No

mahout, after his diligence with "soap" and water, was going to stand his flawless steed on sand or bare earth where a few deft overhead flips of the trunk could put enough soil on the head and back to transform his charge into a muddy disgrace, and himself into the laughing stock of his fellow mahouts.

Finally the A.M. was ready to see the animals and the senior headman advanced with his elephants' log books. Each animal had its own book giving its complete record; name, number and age; any marked peculiarities; its record of health, sicknesses and what treatments it had received; what work it had performed; and a physical description which noted its sex, height, girth, number of toes on each foot, the number and size of each tusk if it was a tusker, the shape and classification of its ears, the type of eye, the length of tail and type of fan at the tip, the shape of the back and a description of any brand marks on the hide. With all this information it was possible to identify one animal from amongst thousands if need arose.

I stood behind the A.M. forming my own impressions but at this stage my knowledge of the Siamese language was rudimentary, and my elephant lore entirely at second-hand. This in no way detracted from my intense enjoyment of the situation and was the beginning of a love for elephants which increased steadily as I came to know them better.

The first animal on parade marched forward; a cow elephant urged gently forward by the mahout, who had removed his hat in politeness and placed it squarely on top of the beast's rounded dome. This was in such grotesque contrast to the hat's normal use that my undisciplined sense of the ridiculous all but shrieked, "the pea on the proverbial drum", and a stern effort was needed to contain hoots of mirth.

She came on like the irresistible force heading for the immovable object and, just when our sudden demise seemed probable, stopped at very close range indeed. Not only could I see the whites of her eyes; I could count the veins in them. All this was taken as a matter of course by everyone else and I schooled myself to a suitable show of indifference. I was a bad pupil however and eventually, thinking discretion the better part of valour, retired several paces to the rear with some agility.

The A.M. continued inspecting and tossed translations and useful information in my direction: the eyes were checked for any incipient blindness through contact with broken branches; the toe-nails were inspected to see that none was split through

excessive travel in rocky country; and particular attention was paid to the chest and back where a hot dry patch might denote the start of an abscess caused by badly fitted harness. With the first elephant, as with all later females, the headman was asked whether she was pregnant and, if so, which was the presumed father. Unless one lived in constant touch such a detail could escape even trained eyes for the first twelve months of the twenty-two months gestation period, and accurate knowledge was important in planning the working schedule.

Next a large tusker advanced with a vigilant footman, stationed between the animal and ourselves, allowing his sharp spear-blade to wink in its eye as a warning and a promise. The A.M. and other worthies accorded Poo Boon Chu, The Honourable One, the respect due to him as our most savage tusker and halted him at a little distance away. He was a beautiful animal with a massive head, large tusks of pale yellow ivory, and a broad back falling sharply to short powerful hind legs. Every line of him suggested explosive power and this was controlled by such an uncertain temper that a ceaseless watch had to be kept on him whenever men were near. Only opium addicts and congenital idiots ever took liberties with Poo Boon Chu, and some of them paid the maximum penalty.

The A.M. said, "Our fiercest animal, our best worker and one of the best elephants you'll ever see", and he was three times correct. I have invariably found that the savage animals, when their fire and spirit are channelled into productive work, are splendid workers. When ridden by first-class mahouts, who will stand no nonsense, such tuskers go at the task of moving logs with almost a personal spite against the massive baulks of timber.

Poo Boon Chu passed Ai and Pah Day, his long-service Karen mahout, earned a word of praise. Despite a mutual respect between man and elephant, Pah Day took one chance too many three years later; he had the audacity to try to ride Poo Boon Chu when it was on "musth" and was picked up by a serpentine trunk, thrown away like a broken branch and crash-landed on a boulder. With a permanently dislocated hip he had finished with elephants for good, but he knew the rules and, having broken them, managed to say that it was entirely his own fault.

And so to another tusker, Poo Ek Kam Sein, The Single Tusked Golden Warrior. (In naming elephants, females are Me, mother, and tuskers Poo or Pah, signifying male or father.) He

was one of our most powerful animals but also a confirmed bolter. Like the egregious Me Nullah, who was to follow him in the parade, he wore a bolting chain, permanently attached through the cartilage of one ear, which terminated in a hook acting as a land anchor. When scared and ready to bolt he shook his head with such ferocity that his mahout of the moment became airborne for a considerable distance. The mahout's last action before leaving the animal's back at rocket speed on his way back to terra firma was to toss the anchor overboard so that at some point in the elephant's mad stampede through the jungle it would become lodged on a projection to bring the bolter to a screeching halt. Lacking such a device it could have taken days or weeks to catch the unhobbled beast during which time it might have eaten its own weight of villagers' crops.

Now for Me Nullah, our most notorious and infamous female elephant, who had the longest crime sheet in the whole herd. Her burglarious exploits amongst growing crops cost us a small fortune in compensation; she could be relied on to smash her saddle on the nearest tree with monotonous regularity, then bolt and get lost for days at a time; and the presence of ponies sent her into ecstasies of fright. Naturally she was always in magnificent condition and quilted in layers of fat through persistent refusal to do any but the lightest of work. With her small piggy eyes rolling to every point of the compass she never seemed to lack an attendant tusker and these did not tolerate half the nonsense we mortals did. Years after my first sight of Me Nullah I saw Poo Tem, exasperated with her coyness no doubt, driving our prized female through the jungle at tusk point on the way to some isolated spot of his own choosing. She was the most anti-social and complete bitch on four legs. Mahouts often resigned rather than ride her, and she was to be a thorn in my flesh for years.

Next Poo Feeang, a small but beautiful animal given to "swai'ing", like Poo Ek, only more so. This action is loathed by the mahouts more than any other party trick in the whole elephantine repertoire, as no human being alive is prehensile enough to stay put on a "swai'ing" elephant for very long and once the rider had been shot off the wildly swaying head he never knew whether his airborne ride would end on a soft bed of sand or head first on a spiky bamboo.

Finally, to complete the senior headman's camp, up came Poo Sedaw Choom See, The Tuskless Choom See, swinging and coiling a tremendously powerful trunk. He had an excellent

working record, though his high-towered back was always something of a problem at saddling time.

The whole camp was passed with a clean bill of health, a feather in the headman's cap, and as he led his camp away the next headman came forward.

The inspection carried on through all the parties and before the last elephant was reached one junior headman earned particular opprobrium by producing an elephant, Poo Lang, with a football-sized abscess on the top of the back which had been caused by a saddle rub. The swelling had been fomented for some days before our arrival with a red-hot mixture of mustard, ground chillies and iodine and was pronounced as ready for cutting. This task, together with the re-branding of several other animals and the cutting of Poo Ban's tusks, was relegated to the afternoon and the inoculations were deferred until the next day.

After lunch we again went over to the camps where a much smaller group of elephants was awaiting our attention.

First the branding took place. An elephant was marched forward and turned until its rump was presented to us. The tail was then lashed to a strong rope which passed under the animal's belly then up into the hand of the mahout perched on its neck. The rider then pitted his strength against the animal and held the rope taut to prevent a swinging tail interfering with branding work.

A thick grey-yellow paste of phosphoric acid was applied to the flank with a bamboo brush in the shape of the Company's brand and, at this stage, it was vital that the tail be strongly confined as a sudden swing scattering the paste into bystanders' eyes would have caused certain blindness.

When the brand was properly painted the animal was sent to stand in the sun for twenty minutes whilst the acid action took effect and as time passed it made strong efforts to reach the irritation with its tail. This was not allowed as it would have meant a smeared brand. When the time was up the beast went off to be washed and, with its head upstream to prevent the corrosive phosphorus reaching its eyes, the brand was thoroughly cleansed then treated with greasy, fly-repellent ointment. Already the brand showed purple against the grey-black skin and within a few weeks, when the old skin had sloughed off, it would show as a distinctive yellow mark against the dark flank.

Then followed the tusk cutting, made necessary by the excessive length of Poo Ban's ivory. He was ridden forward

until his forehead touched the bark of a selected small tree and fettered securely to it so that his tusks were held, one on each side of the tree trunk, with the tips projecting beyond. In this position it was possible for the sawyer to work on the tusk tips yet still avoid a fatal pat from an angry trunk which was restricted in movement by the intervening tree.

The unwieldy length of tusk that Poo Ban was carrying caused too much pressure on the bone socket when he used them for levering timber so he was due to lose six inches from the tip of each.

A joint discussion ensued as to the best place to make the cuts, as dispassionately as engineers might decide on what length to cut a steel bar, and a mark was finally made well below the terminus of the great nerve supplying the tusk. One of the headmen came forward to perform the operation armed with a hacksaw, grease for lubrication and, to my mind, unlimited courage. Spearmen stood by to discourage the elephant from uprooting the tree and the saw began buzzing gently to and fro to make the cutting notch.

It is probably appropriate here to say that a tusk is a vastly modified tooth which has a live basal half, containing the nerve and a mass of dental pulp, and a dead apical half where the nerve has atrophied. The tusks lack an outer layer of enamel but are, otherwise, true teeth. So long as a cut is confined to the dead material all is fairly serene but should the saw-blade touch the raw nerve all hell would break loose and all the spearmen on earth would not be able to prevent the elephant going berserk with pain and rage. In such a case a hasty departure from the scene is the first requirement for staying healthy.

Doubtless with these thoughts in mind Nai Chan, the headman, went cautiously and applied grease liberally. Poo Ban's attention was distracted by footmen who fed him delicacies in the form of balls of crushed tamarind fruit filled with salt and this gambit worked well enough as Nai Chan sawed steadily away. Finally the tip broke off leaving a shorter square-ended tusk in the animal's possession and the same operation was then performed on the other tusk. Primitive dental surgery if you like, with a three-and-a-half-ton "patient" in the chair.

Occasionally this same tipping process was also carried out on particularly savage elephants, those elephants which were savage against others of their kind, that is. If a man-savage animal hit a man with its tusks that unfortunate fellow would

permanently lose interest in whether what hit him had been blunt or sharp. Once a savage animal had been tipped in this way it usually became much more docile, seeming to realize that its once potent weapons had lost much in stabbing power. Finally in the late afternoon we came to the unpleasant job of doctoring Poo Lang's abscess. For this job a "crush" (described in a later chapter) should have been built to confine the animal, but the headman in charge had "forgotten" this important task so, as a reward, was given the unpleasant task of cutting the abscess.

Syringes, potassium permanganate solution, swabs and so on were assembled and Poo Lang was brought up and tied to the main roof post of one of the huts. A knife, which had been specially pointed and sharpened for the surgery, was brought out. The surgeon, one of our most asinine headmen by name of Nai Inn Tasee, took it and mounted the house veranda from where he had easy access to the back of the unsuspecting Poo Lang. He raised the knife and took a mad lunge, piercing the abscess correctly but not following through with a downward draining cut. He was deluged with blood and evil-smelling pus from the punctured swelling but given no second chance to complete his botched job.

The elephant had had enough and came into the act with a shrill trumpet blast and a sideways shake of its head, which tossed the wide-eyed mahout on to the roof of the shack. It wished no further part in the proceedings and jerked its imprisoned legs to such effect that the main house post was whipped out of the ground.

The unsupported hut crashed in a welter of cracked bamboos, clanging cook-pots and startled upended occupants whilst the mahout, bemoaning his fate on the roof, had the softest landing of all. With a group of men pursuing the truant elephant and the remainder laughing at their luckless comrades, who were crawling out of the ruined dwelling, the affair ended as a fiasco and the final treatment of Poo Lang's back was left till a later day.

So ended a day crammed with incidents so unusual, to one like myself who had hardly been a month away from England, as to appear rather unreal.

We were astir early the next day and found the elephants already bathed and waiting for the inoculation parade. I learnt that there were several factors which made for a trouble-free performance. All the animals except those being immediately

dealt with had to be kept a hundred yards or so away from the scene of the operations, then if one did panic whilst being jabbed, its frantic behaviour would only unsettle a few beasts and not the whole herd. Panic, a very contagious emotion, could quickly turn a herd into a milling mob. Furthermore it was generally better to deal with the tuskers of each small group first so that their usually unconcerned behaviour would give confidence to the more nervous females. If inoculations had been started amongst a large number of elephants by upsetting a few unco-operative females, glorious confusion would have almost certainly followed.

These points were observed and the first tusker was marched forward wearing a spray of blue flowers on its head and more of the same were in the mahout's pierced ears. This floral adornment of elephant and rider was a charming and quite common feature of inspections, particularly amongst Karens, but if the bunches of flowers got too large one felt obliged to look beneath them for disguised head cuts. The animal's forelegs were securely tied to a large tree and the outdoor surgery was declared open.

My task, as assistant, was the sterilizing of needles, and the filling of syringes with serum. In an inoculation the needle normally pierces the skin when attached to the glass barrel but with a rubbery skinned animal like an elephant any sudden movement during insertion might result in a broken barrel or a needle snapped off under the hide, or both. Consequently the needle was inserted first and, when lying at an angle under the skin with only the top showing, the barrel was placed in the socketted needle head.

The A.M. wandered casually up to the tusker, now chewing its tamarind and salt delicacy, and after a few soothing smacks began to knead the folds of loose skin behind the foreleg. With a bulging fold of flesh protruding between thumb and forefinger of his left hand the needle was jabbed into the softest looking part. It went in like a hot knife into butter, with nothing more than an impatient grunt from the tusker, and the loaded syringe was then placed in the A.M.'s waiting hand to complete the task by injection of the serum. A perfect performance.

Next came another tusker, also giving no trouble, then up jittered the first female. She had sensed that something was going on and her eyes rolled with nervousness even before she was tied to the tree. As the A.M. approached with poised needle she obviously expected the worst and her hind legs shambled

around trying to keep the maximum distance away from him. Some ten minutes were spent soothing her until the A.M. got near enough to pat her hide, then off she went into another tantrum which needed a further spell of sympathetic handling. Finally a fold of skin was in the A.M.'s hand and the needle jabbed into the restive animal's hide.

She squealed as if in mortal agony and tried to sit down on the half-inserted needle, and on the A.M. incidentally. Finding this no use she peevishly brought a hind leg round in the terrible sweeping forward kick which elephants can employ. Such a kick, if it connected, would kill a man or cripple him for life, and in any close-up dealing with elephants at least half an eye was always trained on the nearest hind leg.

Then followed an exasperating period spent pursuing the beast in tight circles round the tree to complete the insertion of needle, addition of the barrel, and injection of the serum. A perspiring A.M., with several spearmen helping, finally achieved all this and a very scared, violently trembling elephant was led away.

Knowing that I was shortly to try my hand on some selected elephants, this display of pique did little to bolster confidence in my ability to do an injection.

Next came Me Nullah and she, having devoted her useless life to flaunting man and all his conventions, had firmly decided in her own mind that, not only would she not be inoculated but that she would not even be tied to a tree. She departed at speed across the clearing, shedding her mahout on the way, and so far as she was concerned the situation was normal again. For yet another year her hide had remained unpunctured.

With my self confidence almost at zero I heard the A.M. saying, "Try this one for size, guaranteed house-trained and doesn't bite". His levity was aimed at putting me at ease but missed the target by miles. With thumbs totalling five on each hand I approached Poo Boon Chu, but slowly, and perfectly poised for a record leap backwards. Frankly I was perturbed, and anyone "jabbing" his first elephant who claims to have done the job without qualms is guilty of terminological inexactitude.

Telling myself that, "Tuskers are much safer than females in a job like this", was a help and Poo Boon Chu, obviously contemptuous of any injury I might be able to inflict, remained serene and motionless. Even so I did everything with a caution verging on timidity, and at arms' length. Apart from an inquisi-

tive sniff with his trunk aimed at me he hardly moved, and even after I had wasted one barrel of serum with my ten thumbs, permitted me to insert a second load to complete the operation.

The elephant has about the keenest sense of smell of any animal and, if it is true that fear has its own scent, The Honourable's nostrils must have been outraged that day. He played the gentleman throughout however and, having inoculated our worst elephant without incident, I was able to carry on to other animals with increasing nonchalance.

A medicine issue completed our rest camp duties for that year and plans were made to start our return trip the next day.

That night, with the camp sound asleep, I was disturbed by twanging tent ropes when, following close on a terrified yelp, a fast moving body struck my guy ropes in passing. The yelps continued but gradually grew fainter in the distance and, with nerves strung like piano wires, I crept from my flimsy shelter to flash a torch round the thoroughly awakened camp. The A.M. with an almost useless torch was complaining that he couldn't see a thing and cursing hard at his rude awakening.

An investigation showed that his small cross-bred Skye terrier was missing from her usual bed in the warm ashes of the dead camp-fire, and jungle cat tracks nearby made us fear the worst. We could do nothing about it and returned to bed. At dawn next morning an almost defunct terrier crept into camp with deep claw marks on its neck. It looked as though the cat had missed with its first spring and the terrier's awful howl had put it out of countenance. The two animals had then bolted, in opposite directions, with the cat striking my ropes in passing.

It was necessary to treat the claw wounds at once as the teeth and claws of carnivores, due to their liking for decomposing meat, are breeding grounds for the more virulent blood poisoning germs. Corrosive sublimate, a cauterizing agent used for tiger wounds on elephants, was unearthed from a bottle which was heavily marked with a Skull and Crossbones—sign language for deadly poison no doubt.

One blue tablet was crushed and added to warm water in an aluminium dipper. In front of my eyes a white chemical fungus formed on the bottom of the dipper and, before the solution could be transferred to a glass container, ate its way right through the thin wall of the receptacle. Such was my graphic first lesson in the corrosive power of chloride of mercury, and

a compelling reminder to keep it away from my skin. A new, less potent brew was made and the dog's wounds treated to the accompaniment of pitiful whimpers.

All this delayed our departure somewhat but eventually all was loaded and the transport elephants led the convoy out of camp with coolies, one bearing a basket holding the sick dog, bringing up the rear. Again, having seen everyone safely on the move, we moved through the column and went ahead. For a time we travelled through the high evergreen forest on the valley floor, with huge trees rising like pillars from the floor of an outdoor cathedral to produce their first branches a hundred feet in the air. The crowns, densely matted with creepers, reduced the light filtering through to a dim gloom and, as we walked through the dark-green, glossy-leaved bushes that somehow thrive below the evergreen, the smell of dank rotting vegetation was all-powerful. Butterflies, much more richly coloured than in the open forest, provided the one splash of colour.

We left this area via steep ridges, climbing up washed-out red clay paths to the more open, park-like jungle in which teak flourished, then up again through stunted dry forest leading eventually into grassland dotted with clumps of poor bamboo as we neared the summit.

There we could start free-wheeling downhill, following streams which flowed southwards until five hundred miles later their waters poured through Bangkok and into the Gulf of Siam beyond. We were many miles eastward of the road we had travelled by bus a few days before and had made the detour in order to see the Me Palm creek, now spread at our feet, at close range.

From a distance the line of the creek showed as a bright green serpentine ribbon of foliage against the sere background of parched jungle, with its side creeks twisting down out of high hills in further streaks of greenery. I was greatly interested, since the range of hills pointed out by the A.M. during our ride through the Chieng Dao plain was in the Me Palm drainage, and this creek, with its tributaries, would be my stamping ground during the coming season.

The right bank of the stream seemed to be easy rolling country, whilst the left bank, during the whole two days we walked along this lovely creek, was dominated by steep dry slopes leading up to a crest of red cliffs which made a rugged and almost unbroken escarpment. I was told that the right

bank had been worked already and was a closed area and that our work would be confined to the left one.

In reply to my remark that the left bank looked too dry and rocky to support much teak I received the shattering news, "That's true. It's all on top in deep craters." Just the thought of the daily leg-work involved in inspecting such terrain made me feel deathly tired. Even the rugged hills of the Conway valley in Wales, where I had worked with the Forestry Commission, were easy compared to the Me Palm.

The A.M. had explored the craters some time before and agreed that we should probably wear our feet off before we finished the work. During the next two days as we turned westward through rolling country he briefed me on the splendid teak, the abundant animal and bird life and the wild scenery in those freak holes in the ground, until I was quite keen to see them for myself.

Buses were waiting at a pre-arranged spot on the main road, and we dismissed the elephants, then rode into Chiengmai in good time for tennis and some long awaited iced drinks at the Club, with other thirsty teak wallahs.

### CHAPTER THREE

## HIGH COUNTRY

DURING MAY all the teak wallahs from the various firms based on Chiengmai were in town clearing up their previous year's working accounts and getting in a maximum of wassail before they returned to the jungle at the onset of the rains. The enthusiastic Hold Back The Dawn Society at the Club pushed bar receipts to a record height. The concentrated imbibing and convivial good fellowship that formed a feature of the teak wallahs' get-togethers were in the nature of an emotional release after long periods of solitary living, and a buffer against more to follow. Although the drinking was heavy at these times, very few of the men were confirmed heavy drinkers—in fact several were teetotal in the forest.

At the end of May preparations began for the first tour of the working season, which would last a little over two months, and at this time I became the proud owner of a dog, through the generosity of the retiring manager of another British teak firm.

Joe was to be my constant companion for four years and came to me with an unparalleled canine crime sheet. He was credited, or rather debited, with exterminating local dogs, tearing the trousers off coolies, attacking bicycles and depositing fair maids in ditches, stampeding buffaloes with the resultant smashing of carts and generally pursuing anything that moved. When we were introduced he was friendly to the point of drooling idiocy. A very Jekyll and Hyde amongst the canine race, if the stories were true. However, this heavily-muscled terrier impressed me greatly and, having agreed to take him, my last act before leaving Chiengmai would be to take my loaded bus along to accept him from his departing owners.

At the beginning of June my kit and stores for two months were loaded and my small wooden bungalow left to the tender mercies of a completely deaf houseboy. Joe was handed over to me complete with food bowl and sleeping mat, a luxurious piece of carpet. He leapt aboard the bus, occupied the best seat and prepared to enjoy himself. Being a little uncertain as to

his reaction to a cuff on the ear and having some respect for his outsize teeth, I allowed him to remain there and, after chaining him to a wooden strut, took the outside seat myself.

The next forty miles were a continuous fight to keep him inside the bus. He seemed to feel that every pariah dog in sight needed his attention and made staunch efforts to get at them. None of my servants offered any help in what, to them, must have seemed a losing battle and our first stop at Chieng Dao for coffee found me played out, and Joe hanging upside down at the end of his chain administering a tremendous hiding to a large pariah which had barked at me when I alighted. Quite obviously he was enjoying every minute of the scrap and only the chain saved the life of that howling cur. With Joe having had his exercise for the day, the rest of the journey was made peacefully. He wore the pleased and fatuous expression which I came to associate with his more flagrant misdeeds.

At Ban Chang Tai, Village of the Dead Elephant, we were met by our transport elephants, jiggling nervously from foot to foot as our buses came to the usual screeching halt beside them, and loading began. On completion the buses moved off until one had to stop whilst a protesting Joe was kicked off. This habit of leaping on to passing buses for a ride was to cause endless trouble, but he was never cured of it.

The move from the road to our first jungle hut was a short day's march and we were able to make an early camp. During the hot weather men had been building us bamboo and attap shacks in all the areas of concentrated working and it was one of these that we used. Basically they were all the same pattern of large, open-sided living veranda, enclosed bedroom and an attached bath-house where the tin hip-bath was kept. Some were on the ground, others raised on piles, but all had roofs of attap (large leaves pegged on to slivers of wood and tied in overlaps on a framework of bamboo struts). Simple dwellings with the bare minimum of furniture and none of the comforts of home, but still they were our bases for long periods and one got quite a lot of pleasure in returning to them after a particularly wet, muddy spell under canvas where nothing was dry for days on end. The rising from a damp bed to don damp clothes and wet boots for the purpose of squelching round a dripping jungle made some of the wetter days under canvas rather unpleasant.

The work, which was on top of the escarpment seen on our return from rest camps, was to be done by contractors and soon

after our arrival they began to turn up in small numbers. They were mostly Karens, always late in arriving for the working season, always slow in starting work, and often untidy in their felling, but once in action they worked themselves and their elephants very hard.

Their homes might be as much as a hundred miles from the season's work and it was usual for all men who lived along the same stream to gather together so that they could travel to work in a group. They travelled by jungle tracks, avoiding motor roads as much as possible, and on arrival each group built its own private shack, so that a Karen working camp was a jumble of small huts which got dirtier and more tumbledown with every passing day. By the end of the season they were an offence to both eye and nose.

As each group arrived it set about gathering bamboo for camp construction, leaving the elephants grazing in the nearby jungle. Bamboo is tremendously important in the jungle native's economy and, as a result of several visits to watch the camp building, I was able to see a few of the vast numbers of uses to which it is put. The house posts of rot-resisting thorny bamboo were erected, then a frame of *mai sang*—the common bamboo which is a favourite elephant fodder. "Planks" of bamboo, made by piercing the rounded stem in hundreds of disconnected cuts along its length until it opened out flat, were laid on the floor supports and tied by green, sliced bamboo "cord". More "planks" were tied to uprights to form walls and several layers were overlapped on the rafters to form a watertight roof. In this way a hut, so well ventilated by thousands of cracks as to make windows unnecessary, was built from floor to ceiling of one material. A notched bamboo pole leading from ground to living platform was added, and this served as a stairway into the house, though only for athletes, whilst keeping dogs out.

Once the huts were built the camp had officially arrived and before starting work a ceremony to propitiate the spirit of the house and ensure good health for those living in it was necessary. Such a ceremony needed a sacrificial pig and large quantities of liquor, so that more days were wasted while a protesting pig was brought from a distant village.

The men remaining behind had built a small bamboo shrine on the outskirts of the camp—a raised platform about one foot square roofed with bamboo. The whole was surrounded by a spiked bamboo palisade to keep elephants away.

With the pig safely in camp the ceremony started to the beating of drums and monotonous tunes from Karen flutes. The music, singing and shouting reached a climax, then the pig, outstretched on the ground, had its throat cut. A silence followed whilst it was butchered, after which a single file procession approached the shrine. Small offerings of the more delicious portions of pig together with a cup of liquor, some rice, salt and tobacco were placed on the platform and an incantation to the spirit made. Now that the spirit had received the first and most succulent offerings, the Karens were free to celebrate on their own account and during the course of a howling, shouting, musical evening, the pig, skin, feet and all, was washed down many throats by gallons of rice liquor.

Several more days were wasted as they sat round the camp recovering, until the exasperated A.M. blasted them out to start felling. Trees for felling are numbered in sequence and it is usually easy to find them in hilly country simply by never crossing a stream, however small, but by working up one bank, round the headwaters and down the other bank following the numbers. Our Karens who were almost one hundred per cent illiterate could not follow a number sequence, but with their infallible jungle sense they usually found all the trees.

The first tree felled needed the assistance of every man in the camp and was a leisurely business where each man had a turn with the axe. When the cut was about half way through the trunk, on the side to which the tree would eventually fall, work was transferred to the other side where a saw was introduced and two kneeling men worked the double-handed blade like demons, with a third tapping in metal wedges to keep the cut open.

The first signs of collapse would be an almost imperceptible movement when the wedges became looser and then the sawyers, streaked with perspiration, redoubled their efforts. Then a shivering of branches in the crown, a few ominous cracks as the cut opened further and finally the gradual toppling as the leafless crown smashed its way through the surrounding high trees, tearing off great branches and flattening smaller trees until, with ever-increasing speed, the huge tree hit the forest floor a resounding crash.

As soon as the tree started going down, the saw was whipped out and everyone retreated (trees sometimes fell, contrary to expectations, towards workmen), to start a shrill yelling; slow

at first, then more quickly in time with the rate of falling, leading up to a triumphant howl with the final crash. The spirit of that tree had definitely been put to flight.

Now another ceremony was performed in apology for the necessary injury inflicted upon the Tree Spirit and to all Spirits that would be injured in the future felling of trees during the season. This was much less elaborate than the previous ceremony; not through inclination, for any excuse for a party appealed to the Karens, but through lack of funds, and afterwards the men returned to the camp for another day off. From now on the serious felling would begin with the men working in pairs, one pair to each tree.

The only reluctant felling we might expect during the year would be in the case of twin trees; two trunks growing from the same bole, in which one trunk had been girdled for felling and the other left for further growth. This was a sound plan to give the remaining trunk space for development, but the Karens saw it differently. Such a tree had twin spirits which should not be separated. They should either both be injured or both unharmed. Usually they were persuaded to do the necessary felling, but under protest.

After several days of office work, during which our start of season statements for rice supplies, pay rolls, felling progress, etc., were put in order, the A.M. said we would have a preliminary inspection of the felling area. Only a few trees were situated on the slope and these were ignored in favour of the large numbers on the escarpment. After a mile of easy going beside the Huay Pla Tak Nai, we started to climb steeply, then very steeply, then even more steeply until the going became a hands and knees affair, where for about an hour we sweated and cursed as we clawed our way upward to the break in the escarpment. Near the top we passed under the face of one of the red cliffs visible from our camp, Pa Peung (the Bee Cliff), where huge, black clusters underneath overhanging parts of the rock face marked the wild beehives from which the cliff took its name.

Right in the gateway the Karens were building an advance felling camp, so that the weary daily climb of over one thousand feet from their main camp could be avoided. We also would have preferred such an arrangement, but the complete lack of water prevented it. Every drop of water, except a little caught from the dripping roof, had to be carried up from below and the Karens, who dispensed with bathing completely

when they were on the escarpment, could carry necessary drinking water on their backs in hollow bamboo sections.

Looking inwards from the gateway, the first and largest crater showed exactly like a heavily overgrown volcanic one, but as the rock was limestone no volcanic influence was involved. This inverted cone was about two hundred feet deep with impenetrable evergreen rooted in deep mud along its floor and teak on the upper slopes. By following the contours around through teak jungle we were able to go in and out of a succession of similar craters which formed a complete maze.

For the first few weeks getting lost was to be a daily occurrence, especially on days with no sun to indicate compass directions, until the map issued by the Forest Department had been so heavily revised as to bear no resemblance to the original. Via a series of craters one could reach the far side of the escarpment where another line of cliffs looked down on to the Huay Nong Maht which was also being worked, but it was on top of the crater-pitted plateau that the hard toil would take place.

During these early weeks when the daily "crash" of felled teak trees made an ever-increasing background noise in ratio to the ever-increasing tempo of felling, the A.M. spent much time teaching me the rudiments of teak working and it became obvious that there was a great deal of knowledge required in working a teak forest that could be learned only by experience.

I learnt that every thirty years a forest is opened for working by the Forest Department. Parties of selection rangers, each with an allocated area, visit every teak tree in the forest and by measuring the girth of the trunk at breast height find the number and location of all trees mature enough for felling. Each ranger divides his area into sections, which contain roughly two hundred trees each, and on selecting a tree makes a large blaze in the sapwood. On this he inscribes his personal number Z<sub>4</sub>, A<sub>20</sub>, or whatever it may be, the number of the tree and the number of the section, so that after his visit the tree may be marked thus—Officer Z<sub>4</sub>, Section 1, tree No. 164. His report and maps together with those of other rangers are collated by the Forest Department and then further rangers revisit the area in girdling parties.

Whereas the selection officer has a stocktaking job, the girdling officer has a silvicultural one. He has to decide how many of the selected trees in any given section will actually be girdled for Company working and how many reserved to

perpetuate further crops. Trees, usually those of fine shape, are reserved at regular intervals throughout the forest to ensure widespread seed dispersal, and ridge-top trees, whose seed would be scattered on both sides of the ridge, are almost certain to be reserved. After reservations, the balance, possibly 80-90 per cent of the total, are girdled. Each girdling officer has a group of coolies who ring-girdle the tree with axes to sufficient depth to sever the channels which carry food supplies up into the crown for the formation of new foliage.

This work is done in the hot dry weather so that no new foliage can be formed when the wet monsoon growing season starts and, if well done, ensures that within two years the tree will be completely dead with most of the bark shredded off and, most important of all, with a good percentage of the water in the trunk either dried out or drained back into the roots.

Extraction of teak is done by elephant dragging to large streams. A green teak log, i.e., one from a tree which was living at the time of felling, is too heavy to float and consequently has to be kept on the river bank for two or three years to dry out. The delivery of teak logs from the Me Palm to a Bangkok sawmill took four years at the best of times and a wasteful extra three years' wait was most undesirable. Hence the importance of good girdling, which gave a dry, floatable log at the time of felling.

A well-girdled tree then, after attention by the girdling party, would appear, for example, showing the girdling officer to be G1, working on Section 1, as previously selected by officer Z4.

Two years after girdling we were now starting felling on trees which showed as white, gaunt skeletons against a background of forest green.

When sufficient trees were felled we went out to start the season's logging—probably the most important single operation of the forest year. Each tree, with bark and side branches previously removed by contractors' men, was examined as it lay at stump and cut into the most valuable type of logs for the Company's requirements. One limiting factor was the maximum size of log an elephant could drag. This was about five cubic metres (one hundred and seventy-five cubic feet) in difficult country, and seven cubic metres (two hundred and forty-five cubic feet) in easy country, though sometimes animals could be hitched in tandem to take up to fourteen cubic metres

(four hundred and ninety cubic feet) in easy country over short distances. The biggest teak log I ever saw was this size and it took two first-class elephants to drag the ten-ton weight over rollers. A further consideration was the maximum length that could be handled along the various extraction routes. Narrow, rock-strewn river beds and steep, rocky country often made it necessary to cut logs shorter than we would have preferred, and the longest log I ever saw was seventy-four feet long.

At the same time as I was learning what logs could be obtained from any given tree, what to reject and so on, some half dozen Company logging clerks were accompanying us on a refresher course to revise the standards for the new season. When the A.M. had decided they had fully grasped the new logging standards, each man was posted to a sub-division of the forest which put about one thousand trees in his charge. He was responsible for sending in a monthly statement showing all trees felled and logged in his area, the logs he had marked for cutting and a list of trees he had rejected with reasons for doing so. For really concentrated hard walking, his job would be one of the most difficult in the country for the next few months, though our own would be almost as arduous.

Throughout this period, Joe left camp with us each morning and, after strutting through the felling camps looking for any dog unwise enough to challenge his authority, usually accompanied us to the rim of the first crater. Here the fresh animal tracks sent him crazy with delight and he crashed off through bush and briar in pursuit of adventure.

On one occasion I was passing through the gateway when the coolies with me started shouting and waving their arms at an animal feeding at the top of some bamboo stems. It looked like a bear, but, having read from several authoritative sources that bears cannot climb bamboo, I decided that it was something else. As a result of the noise it got scared, slid down the bamboo and ambled away; a bear sure enough and with Joe in hot pursuit. Though its motions seemed clumsy and slow it covered the ground quite fast and was able to keep ahead of Joe until it reached the sanctuary of some rocks.

About a week later, and in exactly the same place, a sambhur shot out of the main crater, where Karens workmen had scared it, and crossed the hill in front of us. It was a splendid stag, chestnut coloured and rather larger than the red deer of Scotland; the graceful and effortless way it made speed across very broken ground was a joy to watch. Again Joe went away



Transport elephants on the march



Pony transport saddling up



in hopeless pursuit, knocking himself silly as he crashed into rocks and making about one tenth of the sambhur's progress.

The normal weekly routine of six days inspecting and one day office was soon established with no days off except for illness; though the office day was certainly more restful than days in the craters. A poor life indeed for any work-to-rule, trade union member. Work started at seven or a little before and we were usually back in camp soon after 1 p.m. Then a bath, lunch and a doze through the heat of the afternoon until 4 p.m. when tea was served. The evening office period when reports and letters were written, contractors interviewed and staff paid, went on from 4.30 p.m. to about 7 p.m., and later in a rush period. This made an arduous sixty-hour, seven-day week, every week and was not at all the idle lotus-eating existence which popular novels attribute to Europeans in the Tropics.

Each day was full of interest and one was too busy to think about whether one was bored or lonely—occasionally depressed by a combination of vile weather and complications in the work certainly, but then so is a Civil Servant going up to London on the 8.15 train. In point of fact, for anyone with a love of nature and the power to adapt himself to the solitary life, jungle work is probably one of the most free and fascinating occupations on earth.

One certainly needed interests outside work; and reading, a portable wireless, orchid collecting and Joe provided mine. Collecting orchids for sale in Chiengmai and Bangkok is a favourite occupation of jungle villagers and in that remote forest it was easy to get plants, by the hundreds, if required. Of course, the really good ones which commanded a handsome price in the towns were not common and it was the collection of these that interested me.

The best known were the large-flowered purple-blue Far-mooie orchid, then various types of pale yellow Sarm Poi, the beautiful golden yellow Bee orchid, the dark purple Black Elephant, the orange and purple Cold Elephant, the yellow and brown striped Wasp orchid, the white small-flowered Buffalo Tongue and, rarest of all, the large, deep red Chang Deng (Red Elephant) orchid. I only saw this last one once, when I bought a huge armful from a Karen workman for half-a-crown. It would have been possible to break this plant into scores of smaller ones for potting. It was not my intention to sell it, but I knew that each plant, when in flower, could be

sold for five pounds in Chiengmai and ten pounds in Bangkok. It was a rarity and I obviously was not alone in appreciating it.

At the end of each jungle trip the new plants were hung outside my house in pots and as regularly as clockwork the best ones were stolen—the Chang Deng went too and some local coolie doubtlessly revelled in his unearned wealth, though the value of plants without flowers was only a fraction of the blossoming ones. My chief annoyance at the time was the fact that I had not seen the flower, which did not appear every year, but in later years I often regretted the loss of the hard cash as well!

With several hundreds of trees felled and cut into logs, as marked by ourselves and the logging clerks, the elephants which had been resting in the bamboo thickets along the Me Palm bank were now required for dragging work in the craters. For several days the Karens had been looking for the best route up the slope and had decided on a gradual climb, zig-zagging across the face, in preference to the direct and rugged climb which tired us every day.

They assembled the first party of elephants complete with dragging chains and working equipment and the animals left about 7 a.m. By midday the bellows of tired, exasperated elephants could be heard just below the gateway. On this trip the mahouts had to cut overhanging branches, hacking with jungle knives from their seats on the elephants' heads, and the animals would not advance a step until they were sure of their footing. The progress was at snail's pace as the animals stamped a path out of the rain-sodden clay slopes, leaving a trail of enormous circular footprints as evidence of their passing. They hated this climb as much on the twentieth trip as on the first, but were able to get up in two to three hours once the trail was well defined and the Karens, always hard taskmasters with their elephants, saw to it that no time was wasted on the ascent.

Once at the gateway camp the animals were turned loose to graze in magnificent fodder. Each working trip from the valley would last four days for the elephants, then they would go down to rest whilst the second party came up. The first day of each trip was wasted in the ascent and then followed three days hard work before the descent became necessary due to lack of water. Though the animals were able to get a certain amount of water from wet foliage and rainwater puddles it was not sufficient for their needs and efforts were made to remedy

this by taking up empty oil drums for water collection, but this never really proved satisfactory.

The first step in extracting the timber was to get the elephants up to the tree stumps where the logs lay cut and waiting. During the rains, with the ground soft and waterlogged, the elephants could stamp a path up very steep slopes, sometimes standing almost erect on hind legs whilst taking their weight on the bent knees of the forelegs. They could pull down obstructing vegetation with the trunk, or knock it aside, and although very slow, they were almost unstoppable unless the route was blocked by rocks. A separate route went to each tree stump and, as this would be used only once to get the logs down, no elaborate cutting or clearing was done as was the case on the much used paths.

Having reached a stump, the elephant used his head to separate the logs from each other and from the debris of the fallen tree. Usually at this stage the country was too broken to attach dragging gear to the logs, so they were "aunged" (pushed with the head) down the slope. On steep slopes the logs toboganned down after the initial push at ever-increasing speed, smashing through the undergrowth, bouncing off rocks and starting miniature landslides, until the slope ran out and they were brought to a jarring halt against some big tree or boulder. The elephant then moved carefully down to the new position and repeated the gambit as many times as necessary to bring logs into a position for dragging.

Logs from difficult situations might have to travel half a mile or more to reach a dragging site and for such work an elephant was the only answer. No other animal could have performed this task on small half-ton logs, let alone the five-ton, seven cubic metre forest giants. When a log reached a dragging position, dragging chain holes were cut at each end with the deep, narrow-bladed axe used in teak working. Such holes lay side by side some six inches from the end of the log and were known very aptly as "nostrils" by the Siamese. With the dragging chains passed through holes and coupled, the elephant was firmly attached to the log and received the order "Drag".

It jiggled from foot to foot ensuring itself of good footing, hunched itself and leaned back in its harness, all in a most leisurely manner. Then, with a tremendous surge of weight and straining hind legs, it lunged into the dragging collar with an almighty jerk that set the mahout's head snapping back on his shoulders. This initial jerk generally broke the log loose

from its embedded position and with the log on the move, the thrust into the dragging collar became more steady and sustained. The log was heaved over branches and small rocks and torn through vegetation, leaving a swathe of wreckage in its wake. With frequent halts to edge it round difficult obstacles, it was taken down to the main drag path by way of a rocky stream-bed or possibly, when logs came from high country, along the tops of ridges.

On arrival at the main drag, path logs were inspected again in a much more thorough manner than was possible when they lay at stump and defects eliminated by cutting, or by rejection of whole logs where defects were too severe. The commonest defect was that of hollow logs usually caused by fire damage during the earlier life of the tree, or by the roots of the parasite Wild Fig which gradually strangled all life out of the host tree and often, in so killing off its main source of food, killed itself. Such hollows were often occupied by termites' nests and, more uncommonly, by bees' nests. Other defects were bee-hole, bird-hole, sun-crack and bear-hole.

"Bee-hole" was a term used to describe the damage done by the larvae of the bee-hole borer beetle—small surface holes which, in a badly infested tree, led to a network of deep tunnels which made a log useless, in that no perfect, hole-free planks could be cut at the sawmill.

"Bear-hole" normally showed as large splintered holes where Bruin had clawed his way through several inches of timber to reach grubs or wild honey.

"Bird-hole" was usually superficial damage caused by woodpeckers piercing the timber in their search for burrowing beetles and grubs.

"Sun-crack" only appeared in logs that had lain on the forest floor for years and, as the name suggests, was a weathering process resulting in deep radial cracks, which often ruined otherwise good logs.

When logs had been checked on the main drag path elephants took over again—each taking a log forward for about half a mile before being uncoupled and ridden back to deal with another log. The walk back after each log had been moved one stage forward was time consuming, but it was found that the division of labour into half a mile of dragging followed by a half mile stroll before further dragging produced the most work and was less tiring to the elephants than longer or shorter distances.

The routine of logging, cutting, "aunging", inspection and dragging was in smooth operation by mid-rains and the A.M. then called me round to one of the larger side creeks of the Me Palm where he was handling the main working area and the Company elephant camps. He was established in the Huay Pong bungalow, situated on a grassy flat surrounded by hills. Not quite as severe as the Me Palm crater hills to be sure but here again, sadly, the teak was on the tops.

In this area there were several contractors and six Company camps. The latter required a great deal of attention and a mile away in a small village we had a godown, from which rice was issued to them each month, a bullock train for delivering it, and a store where working equipment was kept. Some of the clerks who had been put in charge of this supply depot seemed to find the temptation to "fiddle" rice and equipment irresistible and frequent checks were most necessary.

In addition to arranging food and supply lines we acted *in loco parentis* to our employees. We were elected, without the option, to be their "father and mother" as the local idiom had it and in this capacity acted as banker, postmaster, doctor, counsellor and any other position they could coax us into holding. The fewer decisions they had to make the happier and less complicated life became—for them at least.

The Company camps in the working area were the ones which we had inspected earlier in the year in rest camps. They had emerged at the beginning of June, at the start of the wet monsoon, with both men and elephants in a fat and contented frame of mind, but strongly disinclined to start work after their long rest. The bitter struggle to get these camps into working order had fallen to the A.M. and in later years when I had the chore myself I found that rousing them from their tremendous inertia was rather like pushing a steamroller uphill. The minute that pressure was relaxed during the early months they lapsed into a passive resistance movement with a do-nothing policy. In contrast to contractors' camps, who were paid on results, our own camps were on fixed salaries and their results were largely dependent on continued coaxing and encouragement.

It was generally the case that our own camps, with better elephants and equipment, were held in reserve for the most difficult working areas for which contractors were unwilling to tender and, that year, they had been allocated the rugged headwaters of the Me Bawkoo creek. This Me Palm side-

stream combined rocky slopes, craters and a main drag of several miles with unhealthy, malarial conditions.

On their arrival each camp had been given as large an area of forest as it was judged its elephant strength could manage. Each headman then spent several days going over his allocated country finding where the bulk of the timber was situated, where good fodder and water were to be found and, finally, in siting his working camp in a conveniently central position.

Camps were built in the same manner as the Karen ones described earlier, but more efficiently, then the headman came in to ask for *lieng pee* (spirit money), for the dedication of the camp. This ceremony was substantially the same as the Karen one and the superstitious animistic belief was supported to the extent that we paid for the opening celebration.

Felling in the Me Bawkoo was well under way when I arrived though the A.M. was bemoaning the bitter struggle and the excessive legwork he had put in to get the men in action and decided that a day or two checking the supply depot would be a welcome relief from hill walking.

The track to the depot passed through a narrow belt of evergreen high forest and had been well used by elephants, as the deep mud and water-filled circular footprints showed. We arrived, generously covered in adhesive red mud, to be welcomed at the gate by the supply clerk—a very old, wizened, and nearly blind Burman, Mg Ba Thet, who greeted the A.M in Burmese and myself in his hilariously misphrased English. He assured us that "All is very well sir, yes sir, without a doubts" and escorted us to the store sheds which were ceremoniously unlocked.

He had six padlocks in use on the compound and much fumbling and near-sighted peering were necessary to select the correct key from amongst his enormous collection. (Almost all the forest people had a magpie complex about keys; often coolies who had never owned a padlock had an impressive bunch of useless keys.)

The rice godown was a long low structure, raised on piles which were kept freshly painted with tar to discourage marauding ants, and we entered through the low door into a gloomy cavern. The space inside formed a hallway and on each side of the hall were two large open bins lined with bamboo plaited matting; two were full, leaving two in reserve. Dry rice and glutinous rice were separately housed in the filled bins and the check consisted of passing brimming wooden buckets, each

stamped with a Government seal denoting accurate capacity, from a full bin to an empty one via a human bucket chain.

In this way each man passed two tons of rice through his hands every hour and after the three to four hours needed to complete the task was quite tired.

As each bucket passed along the chain we kept the score in notebooks, whilst the clerk did the same on the efficient, split bamboo which is universally used in the jungle for counting. This consisted of a narrow bamboo slab split lengthways into ten equal strips, which were all attached at the base giving the appearance of a closed fan. Each strip was marked with ten equi-distant notches and, as each bucket was emptied at the end of the chain, one notch was broken. At the end of each strip with the score at ten, the amount was called and work started on another strip. After a hundred buckets all notches on one slab were broken and it then looked like a badly smashed open fan. It was an almost infallible method of counting, even for illiterate coolies.

When all the rice was counted in this way, the balance was compared with that which stood in the issue book and the clerk either praised or rebuked depending on how accurately the two accounts compared. A certain waste was inevitable due to rice dust and the depredations of mice, but a more serious shortage suggested that a "fiddle" was in progress. In such a case the clerk first blamed the rice contractor—"A bad man who brings short measure, sir" then the mice—"very active and difficult to eradicate, sir"—and finally—"impossible of understanding, sir, as my measure is always correct", but never, under any circumstances, did he admit to an error on his part. On occasion the mice in that godown, a small handful of timid souls, were accused of consuming a hundred or more times their own weight in rice per week!

The staple diet of our staff, as with the majority of Asiatics, was rice and each man was allowed two buckets, about sixty-five pounds, per month. They seemed to have no difficulty in consuming this enormous amount together with red hot chillies, vegetables and such fish or meat as they could catch or buy locally.

After the rice check was finished, the salt and tamarind bins were weighed. These never balanced as it was common practice for tradesmen to water the sticky, compressed tamarind fruit before selling by weight, and the moisture dried out in the godown giving us a deficit. By contrast the salt, the coarse

rock crystal type, was supplied dry, but always picked up moisture during the wet monsoon and leaked through the floor so that no great furore was made about shortages.

These two commodities were issued only to elephants (though they were freely used by the men in a badly run camp) at the rate of five pounds of each per month per animal. The tamarind acted as a gentle laxative and was particularly effective in the cold and hot seasons when fodder was driest. The salt acted as a blood tonic and both were much appreciated by the elephants who received a mixed ball each day before going to work.

Finally the working equipment was checked, the bullocks inspected to see that there were no back sores from badly fitting saddles and Mg Ba Thet could breathe easily again knowing that his establishment was in good order.

He had one achievement which gave him more pride than speaking the English he had learnt half a century before in some Mission school, and that was writing English. He would rather spend most of a day composing a report on grubby bits of paper and then copy it in immaculate script on to foolscap, than walk a mile and get the whole thing over in ten minutes. He was addicted to proverbs, often garbled, and gave us many amusing moments.

On one occasion the coolies at the godown were refusing to work to his orders and the following gem arrived late one evening after he had spent the day revising it.

Dear Sir,

I beg to submit my report herewith that the coolies under my Godown submit themselves intractable to my instruction. They are very stubborn to work and I beseech you sir, that I cannot get blood out of stone of coolies.

Respectfully,  
Mg Ba Thet.

Such a plea deserved a reply in kind so the answer went back.

Dear Mg Ba Thet,

What are the coolies doing under your Godown? Blood from stony coolies is indeed difficult but be thankful that they are not snakes in the grass that bite the hand that feeds them. Do your best to make silk purses out of sows' ears.

Yours etc.

On another occasion the rice sacks used for delivering rice to camps were getting worn and in need of repair and along came the familiar note.

Dear Sir,

Rice sacks at the Godown are old and disintegrated so if you would please issue needle and twine I could repair same. A stitch in time saves nine and half a loaf is better than no bread for coolie. [Presumably a reference to the smaller carrying capacity of the sacks once repaired].

Respectfully,  
Mg Ba Thet.

Back went our reply containing a hint that he went into print too often.

Dear Mg Ba Thet,

Herewith needle and thread. Least said soonest mended and a wink should be as good as a nod to a blind horse.

Yours etc.

With the supply depot checked we were free to continue inspection of working areas. Each headman was notified, some days ahead of our arrival, where to meet us on the appointed day. With each day being much the same as every other, it would have been easy to gain or lose a day and go to the appointed place to find that the headman had been yesterday or was coming tomorrow. The scrupulous daily entry of one's working diary helped to keep such incidents to a minimum, whilst the headmen usually had a block calendar attached to an *Esquire* type bathing beauty picture to help him keep time.

Punctuality was a little-prized virtue and I often thought of Siam as the Land of Prung Nee (Tomorrow). This philosophical outlook admirably suited their way of life and on really urgent occasions they could move like blue streaks accomplishing vast amounts.

The first headman we met, Nai Kim, an aged patriarch with two wives and an enormous brood of children, had got his date, place and time correct for a change and was waiting for us at the foot of his dragpath. This path which required much cutting into the steep hillside should have been com-

pleted, but showed signs of just being started where a few emaciated coolies were picking away with mattocks.

With tears in his eyes the headman told us of the perfidy of his men; for the second or third time that season they had run away *en masse* after growing weary of watching their rations go to fatten the headman's brood. Presumably the few remaining coolies were too weak to run far and were hanging on hoping for better times.

The felling and dragging work were also well behind and the headman was informed that unless he got some men to stay and work, he would have to turn out his two wives and nine children for duty. This he thought uproariously funny and worth a little serious consideration before being turned down as unworkable.

Kim had been with the Company more than twenty years and given splendid service, but in recent years had crashed badly on every job given to him so that the A.M. decided he would be pensioned off as soon as a replacement could be found, lest his former good work was completely masked by his present incompetence. An addiction to opium further weakened his authority over the camp and necessitated additional cheating to pay for his expensive habit. All in all his set-up was a model of inefficiency.

Having conveyed all this to him quite forcibly, without shattering his complacency in the least, we proceeded up into the timber areas, to find what work had been done reasonable in quality, but minute in quantity. To sidetrack our growing displeasure he counter-attacked and complained bitterly about us giving an old man like him the most difficult area in the forest whilst young, active headmen were strolling around their easy areas—a gross libel as there wasn't an easy area in the creek, but he had certainly drawn one of the worst and asked us to look at some girdlings which it was impossible to work.

He led us round the side of one steep cliff, along the shelf at the top of it, up a long scree and stopped at a cliff whose bottom ten feet were quite sheer, then pointed dramatically upwards. "There they are," he said, and sure enough they were. A bamboo was cut, notched, and laid against the cliff and after an undignified scramble to the first ledge we were on easier—relatively—ground.

The six or so girdlings had rooted in narrow shelves along the cliff and it was quite impossible for elephants to get to them. In every really difficult forest a few such trees were

found and, although all had to be felled by the terms of our lease, we sometimes found we had to abandon logs which coolie labour could not dislodge. A pair of workmen were pecking away at one of the trees on our arrival; their feet and bodies firmly wedged against a sudden plunge over the edge and their felling swing restricted by the cliff face—slow and unrewarding work and not without an element of risk.

Leaving these two men we worked our way to a point much higher up the cliff to another ledge where a tree had been felled and logged. One small log had been moved, by coolies with crowbars, in the only direction possible, almost straight down, and its shattered remains were clearly visible a hundred feet or more below us. The remaining larger log, a good one, was irretrievably jammed where it had fallen and was rejected on the spot. No man power at our command would ever move it.

Each assistant had a personal hammer which was impressed on every stump visited as evidence of inspection and the A.M. had a mania for stamping his on the highest stump on every hill he could reach. This gambit gave us some weary climbs but served two useful purposes—it took us to the most inaccessible timber where workmen felt more free to do their sloppiest work and also gave us excellent views of the surrounding country which enabled a rough check on felling progress in other creeks to be made.

We certainly stamped the highest stump on that hill, but a much higher hill was visible nearby—clearly too high to support teak. Looking fixedly at the headman, the A.M. declared that we would climb it. Kim pantomimed horror, convulsions and sudden collapse like the born clown he was, and when we had had our joke at his expense the matter was dropped. The hill in question was a soaring pinnacle named Doi Kim (Kim's Hill) after the old headman—whether because he was quite unable to climb it or because he was firmly determined never to attempt it, we didn't learn.

The descent, culminating in a scramble down the notched bamboo, was made in a shower of loose stones and when we could once again get off hands and knees and walk, Kim was heard announcing very emphatically to all and sundry, "One thing's certain. I won't be here next year." Having aroused our curiosity on this point he went on with his irrepressible toothless grin, "No, I'll either be dead from overwork or sitting in my village drawing a Company pension." A clear hint that coincided with our own ideas!

On our return journey we passed through the headman's camp; two shacks, one overflowing with the headman's two wives and offspring, the other deserted save for one coolie laid up with beri-beri who was acting as camp cook to the few remaining workmen. Kim was ordered to feed him up and collect a large dose of vitamin pills from our camp that evening, so that the man could be revived sufficiently to walk a little before being assisted into Chiengmai for hospital treatment.

In almost all the illnesses that we had to treat the cases were not notified until quite serious and, with our very limited medical knowledge, our efforts to help would often have been useless had we not been aided by the shining faith the jungle men had in pills, preferably highly coloured, and in injections.

The first question asked of any sick man was, "What are you suffering from?" There was none of the professional pride of the doctor about us. We didn't pretend to know because we never did know and we laid claim to no soothing bedside manners either! The answer was invariably *kai* (fever), which they understood, or *lom* (wind), which covered every ailment of the insides which they did not understand. This sprang from the old belief that all sickness came from gases making mischief inside the body.

Next day we were out betimes to inspect yet another Company headman and his area. Nai Tooie always ran a very good outfit though his personal excess was, or had been, liquor to the point of D.T.s. Earlier in the season he had been sent in to see the doctor with a note saying that his malady needed little diagnosis, but the treatment and cure were dependent on a thorough scare being thrown into him about the effects of heavy drinking. The doctor must have painted a lurid picture as Tooie arrived back at work a thoroughly frightened and chastened man with only a fraction of his former devotion to the bottle. An example of applied psychology which probably saved us a good headman.

By contrast with the shambles of the previous day, the inspection of good drag routes, well rollered to help the elephants, good felling and intelligent logging proved very encouraging and after commanding the headman we returned along a path which would take us through his camp site.

Joe, in a relative obedient mood, had stayed with us all morning, but strayed ahead of us as we neared the headman's camp. His position was indicated by excited barking and, assuming he was engaged in a slanging match with his arch

enemies, monkeys treed beyond his reach, we kept going to find ourselves in a ringside position for an unequal contest between Joe and an elephant.

After a quick glance, the headman rushed to camp for spears and helpers and we put a steep gulley between ourselves and the arena, while some of the more timid coolies made impressive speed up into tall trees.

Our alarm, Joe alone being unconcerned, was caused by the fact that the elephantine half of the battle was being waged by Poo Boon Chu, always a dangerous animal, who had been hobbled and was grazing peacefully near camp until aroused by a sportive bull terrier to whom size meant nothing. Nearly all elephants have an unreasoning fear of dogs and horses, both of which have bolted my transport elephants at times, and Joe was being a supreme nuisance in his own guerrilla fashion.

He never placed himself in a position to be kicked by the hind legs or flattened by the trunk and never bit the elephant, though always suggesting that he might do. By a mixture of bull-baiting tactics inherited from his ancestors, and alternating clockwise and anti-clockwise circles, he had Poo Boon Chu kicking furiously at dogless air and swinging in circles. Hobbled forelegs were lifted clear of the ground as he pivotted on the hind ones, trying to get in a smack with his uplifted trunk.

The tusker was in a roaring fury at his "will o' the wisp" opponent when the camp men turned out with spears and a few blazing brands, but after a few hearty jabs was all too ready to call the contest a draw and resume feeding.

The trouble was that Joe found racing in and around spear-men and the tusker a type of Unmusical Chairs much to his liking and each time Poo Boon Chu was moved away, there was Joe coming in for the next round and further aggravating the situation.

The elephant was completely fed up with being speared for his innocent part in the scene. His shrill trumpeting and the large pieces of earth being uprooted by his tusks indicated that he might soon run amok. I called to the headman to spear the dog or send it to the Inferno with a blazing brand and this new approach settled the issue.

Joe retired across the gulley to rejoin us with the pleased imbecile expression of one having done a silly but enjoyable act. As a reward he received a belt across the ribs that broke my stick, hurt my wrist and changed his expression to one of

outraged dignity—physical hurt didn't seem to cross his infinitesimal brain and such was his charm, as bull terrier owners are surely aware, that he was soon forgiven for the scare he had given us.

This actually proved to be the only occasion, in all the years I had him, in which he deliberately provoked an elephant.

Inspection of camps, working areas, logging clerks and their work, checks on rice, stores and the thousand and one small items making up the working organization kept one fully occupied throughout the rains, but with the onset of the cold weather in early November the tempo of work became easier. All felling was stopped because the drying earth provided an increasingly hard landing for the falling teak trees and resulted in excessively cracked logs. The elephants were more limited in their activities, being no longer able to kick footholds in steep slopes, so that work of all kinds became increasingly concentrated around dragpaths and timber delivery points.

I was back in my own area during this period and the A.M. was touring around from one bungalow to another inspecting his own large forest. During the tour he stopped off at Pang Bok, a small bungalow hidden away in a distant part of the Me Palm river basin, and was proceeding with routine inspection work. Contrary to normal practice he sat on his veranda one afternoon writing up accounts in the heat of the day.

A tusker, belonging to a contractor, was grazing quietly behind the bamboo shack and gradually working its way nearer the back of it. Confirmation of its extreme proximity came with a splintering crash as its tusks came through the flimsy wall. In all probability it had mistaken the shack for a rice store and had broken in searching for edible grain, but this was little consolation to the A.M.

His camp-bed with mosquito net enclosing it had been hard against the broken wall and tusks had ripped the net so badly as to render it useless. The only reference in print to this near escape was a laconic note to our Chiengmai office. "Send one mosquito net soonest, debit contractor X with cost."

If he had been taking the customary afternoon siesta I might have been writing much sadder news.

Work had gone well in my absence except for one major hold-up during an anthrax scare.

One of the elephants belonging to our main Karen contractor had died of an unknown illness and in a general panic, through fear of anthrax, about twenty animals had been rushed

to a distant part of the forest away from the dreaded disease. Very firm insistence on their return resulted in a slow re-appearance of most of the animals, though some had actually returned to their villages and never did come back. Ironically the original dead animal had not been suffering from anything worse than debility and/or strained heart, but in the area to which they all bolted, two more animals died from what might well have been anthrax judging from the reported symptoms.

Anthrax, the most deadly killer of all elephant diseases, can spread through a herd like lightning. Once an animal has the disease nothing can be done to save it and understandably the Karen, who converted their wealth into elephants as a form of investment yielding good interest, and new capital in the form of calves, were always perturbed by elephant sickness.

All the herds belonging to European companies were inoculated yearly against anthrax and few, if any, confirmed cases were recorded. Headmen were issued with bloodslides and instructed on the taking of bloodsmears, so that whenever an animal died blood samples could be rushed for analysis to the efficient Veterinary Department in Bangkok.

On one occasion an illiterate headman was instructed to get dung and blood samples from a sick animal suffering from suspected septicaemia. Obviously believing that the more blood he provided the more could be learnt from it, he sent in a sample like a ham sandwich. One slide with a layer of dried blood as thick as a fingernail was covered tenderly by a second slide. This was enclosed in a cigarette tin together with the dung and carefully wrapped in an old copy of *The Times*. It was forwarded to Bangkok in this condition by one of our Asiatic office staff and the justified howls of anguish from the Veterinary Department were transmitted to all headmen during a refresher course.

Notwithstanding the Karen anthrax scare, a great deal of dragging had been done from craters situated in the centre of the plateau and the bulk of the logs were now lying at the gateway awaiting final inspection. Several hundred more logs from distant craters were waiting on the rim of the escarpment some distance away, but it was considered hardly worth while inspecting them until they reached the valley floor, as on their thousand foot headlong descent down rocky slopes a good percentage of matchwood would inevitably be produced.

After inspection of timber at the gateway, logs were dragged forward to the head of the slide, a strip down the hillside

cleared of rocks and vegetation, and a push from an elephant's head started each one on its mad toboggan over the slick clay surface. All going well the log ended up about five hundred feet lower down, still intact but smothered in bright red clay. Where a log shot off the narrow cleared track into the surrounding jungle, the expensive noise as it exploded into fragments against a rock gave us a clear picture of the mishap.

At the bottom of the slide another party of elephants was dragging logs across a small glade to the top of the second slide and nudging them forward for the next rush down the slope ending in the Me Palm valley. In this way the logs travelled the thousand feet descent in fewer seconds than it took us minutes to climb the same slope and arrived with splintered ends, embedded stones and red clay deeply ingrained in the wood. This colour was so distinctive that we were able to recognize logs five years later as they floated down the Me Ping more than three hundred miles south of their starting point in the Me Palm.

From the bottom of the second slide logs were dragged forward to measuring point on the banks of the Me Palm and arranged in serried ranks. Ends were trimmed, blazes made for receiving data on the size and the year felled, and the Company marks and property hammer applied all over the log. This property hammer was of a pattern approved by the Royal Forestry Department and unique to our Company. It served to distinguish our timber from that of other firms as logs lay mixed in the main river and also discouraged thieves who had to cut off every one of the several hundred "chops" on the log. If a thief was caught with a log in his possession, bearing just one recognizable property "chop", he could be prosecuted by the firm concerned.

With all marking in order a date was fixed with the contractor for measuring. The contractor's representative and myself checked length and girth measurements, entered them in our stock books, then a clerk chalked log number, length and girth on the measuring blaze and we moved on to the next log. Hammering clerks, each wielding a circular-headed hammer with steel numbers raised round the rim, followed behind and stamped a permanent record of the chalked figures on each blaze. In this way one could deal with up to a thousand logs on a good day at the rate of two hundred per hour.

In addition to the reading of lengths and girths, entering the book and seeing that the same figures were chalked on the



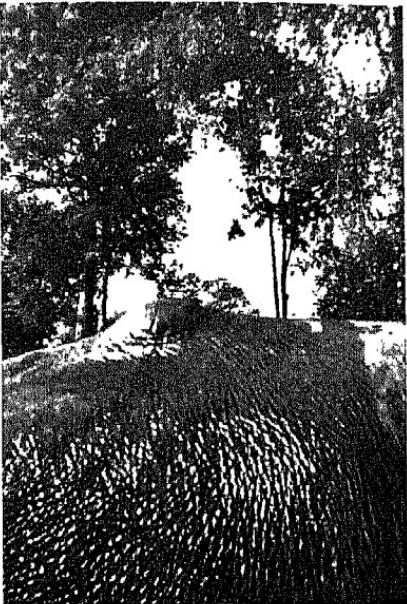
Inoculating against anthrax



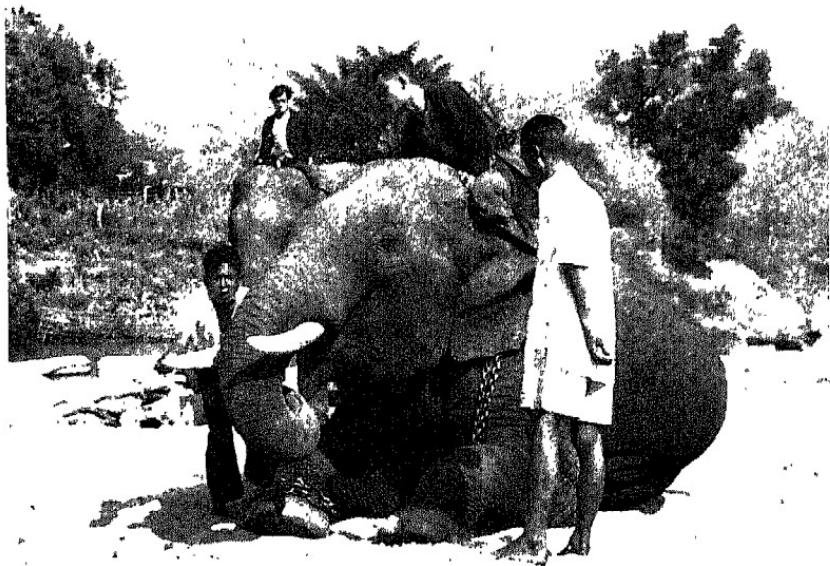
Branding a newly purchased elephant, branding completed on animal in centre rear. (Tails of both animals tied under rear)



Operating on a back abscess



Operation complete



Measuring tusks on newly purchased elephant

log, one had to keep a constant vigilance on all the men handling the tape and measuring sticks. The men on this work were appointed equally from contractor and Company labour and it was to the contractor's advantage to have the size noted as high as possible since he was paid on the amount delivered. We, on the other hand, wanted the lowest genuine reading possible so that no extra money was paid for timber delivered; so that the royalty paid to the Government was as low as possible; and so that dealers buying timber in Bangkok on the basis of the hammered figures would get a square deal. The importance of correctly hammered numbers was obvious so these were checked against chalked figures after measuring was completed.

The probability of the contractor's men helping him, and the possibility of our men being bribed to help him to get high figures was always present, but with the aid of what felt like six eyes and twelve hands, and a truly impressive fine for any "fiddling", incidents were kept to a minimum.

Working in the jungle during the cold season was a real pleasure; one left camp at dawn wearing several pullovers against the slight nip of frost in the air and gradually disrobed as exercise warmed one up, returning in the middle of the day in clear sparkling weather ready to eat the worst concoctions the cook could produce with relish and feeling well disposed towards the world in general. For three months the climate was quite superb.

With measuring finished in my area, I moved back to the Me Bawkoo whilst the A.M. was away and found the depot in a furore. Obviously the sparkling weather had roused the tired blood of Mg Ba Thet, or possibly the shivering cold nights had influenced him. Whatever the reason he had decided to take a new young wife to console him. He had negotiated with Sing Noi, the rice contractor, and, after agreeing the price to be paid to the bride as a dowry, Sing Noi had brought one of his nieces for approval. All seemed satisfactory and Mg Ba Thet assumed married status without the benefit of the clergy. All went well until the payment of the dowry (after a satisfactory trial period) was required and then Mg Ba Thet, still thinking no doubt in proverbs that he would "have his cake and eat it", refused to pay but agreed to return the girl.

This flagrant act of bad faith together with the resultant loss of face—a vitally important concern—to the girl's family, and to Sing Noi in particular, caused bitter feeling in and around

the depot and after exchanging verbal insults Sing Noi started a counter-attack. He organized relays of villagers to beat a drum all night outside Mg Ba Thet's house and keep the old man sleepless. It also rendered the Company coolies sleepless and they finally ran away to take up quieter work. Now with Mg Ba Thet holding the fort alone, showers of stones began to descend on his thatched roof each night and loud insults were added to the drumming.

On hearing of my arrival he, for once, did not stop to compose a letter but bestirred his old bones with some speed and poured his tale of woe in my ear—omitting all reference to the maid and his own double dealing. This resulted in Sing Noi appearing, receiving an angry lecture and being dismissed from my presence without being allowed to state his case. A flagrant miscarriage of justice!

However his chance came a few days later. Kim's horde of children, with appetites sharpened by the cold weather, were eating such prodigious amounts of rice that Kim had had to arrange an unofficial supply from the godown with the connivance of Mg Ba Thet. The latter on hearing of my arrival and an imminent rice check, had gone round the village trying to buy rice to replace the shortage and Sing Noi, hearing of this, had forbidden any sales. He then composed a vitriolic anonymous letter (from the ever-present Friend and Well-wisher) detailing the supply clerk's failings, together with revealing information on the marriage fiasco. An immediate check confirmed that almost two hundredweight of rice were missing and Mg Ba Thet went to join his predecessors in enforced retirement. On seeing him depart one wondered how long his successor would last—"the Devil you know can't be worse than the Devil you don't know", sort of feeling.

Besides Company working elephants, we had in the Me Palm area three old ladies who were used on transport work—Me Wah, Me Wark and Me Kao Sarm Kom. The first two were very active and useful, but the last one was old, ill and so near death's door that she was allowed to graze unhobbled and was almost never worked. She was a rarity amongst elephants in having breasts, which are situated between and a little behind the forelegs, to the total of three in place of the usual two, hence her name meaning Mrs. Kao Three Breasts.

Though unhobbled she was not in the habit of wandering further than the nearest patch of good shady grazing where she would stand all day casually pulling down mouthfuls of

food, flinging cooling sand over her back and swishing idly at flies with a leafy branch held in her trunk. She was well known and it was usually easy for the mahout to find her simply by asking forest people where they had last seen her grazing.

One day the mahout reported that he had failed to find her and after three days searching, with similar lack of success, Company search parties were turned out. With no hobbles or trailing tying chain to leave traces of her passage over the hard ground, the quest was a difficult one and after a week we still had no news. One evening, nine days after she had first been noted missing, a villager reported a dead female elephant lying in dry jungle about ten miles away and an inspection proved it to be our old lady who had wandered off to be alone with her illness; probably the wasting disease of surra picked up through the feet from cattle-infected ground.

I went out to see the remains and at a distance of a hundred yards picked up the stomach-turning stench of several tons of meat putrefying in the tropical sun. She was lying in a small clearing surrounded by bushes and the glittering blue-black colour of these was puzzling until a stone dispersed millions, literally millions, of shiny-bodied flies all gathered for the feast. She had probably been dead two or three days and the legs had been partly eaten by jungle animals and by vultures. The latter, disturbed at their feast, were circling high above waiting for us to go.

It was necessary to burn the carcass completely to prevent the spread of disease via animals and flies eating the flesh or through resting spores lodging in the ground which would thus remain infected for several years.

It was hopeless asking for volunteers for the job—money couldn't buy them. The headmen were therefore told to provide men and no doubt took great satisfaction in delegating the job to camp troublemakers. This luckless party of men spent two or three days collecting the tons of wood necessary for the "Barbecue" and on the evening before burning commenced came along and asked for a fantastic amount of money to buy liquor, for a ceremony I thought. The request was granted but the amount reduced to a fraction of that asked.

Thereon detailed explanations on the hazards of burning a putrefied elephant, with some graphic pantomime of men being heartily sick helping to fill in the gaps in my understanding of the Lao dialect, convinced me that, far from being

for ceremony, the liquor was to be their sole source of food for the several days needed in burning the remains. The amount issued was enough to buy well over a gallon of liquor per man and their completely empty stomachs, coupled with the heat of the fire they would be stoking, ensured that they would be thoroughly, even royally, drunk throughout. The aroma they worked in could not be described; it defied belief and strained the imagination, and a state of alcoholic numbness was much to be desired. On completion of the task the party was rewarded with a carton of cigarettes and the men returned to their camps in a hungry state of mind.

Although the working areas were more difficult than those in any of my later forests, the easy valleys and proximity to the main highways made it relatively easy of access to carting trucks. Indeed they were able to use a private road for the first five miles and thereafter drove branch roads to all parts of the forest.

Elephants were again enlisted to push the measured logs into clumps, each clump usually being four to eight logs and weighing up to ten tons, ready for the mechanical hoist to lift them on to carting trucks which would deliver the timber to the main river about fifteen miles away.

When new these carting trucks, mainly short wheel-base Chevrolets, were resplendent with chrome ornaments and usually had a bright chiffon scarf fluttering from the radiator. Possibly a token from some village belle to the Knight of the Road who drove the vehicle. The hard treatment and pitted earth roads quickly took the shine off and it was more usual to see trucks minus bonnets, often minus windows and doors, with cotton waste serving as a radiator cap and with colossal dents on the body work. Tyres were both costly and hard to come by, so that treads worn to the canvas and blowouts were not counted drawbacks to further use. It was common to see tyres, the walls of which were held in place by steel plates bolted through the rubber bouncing along the roads. The Siamese have a real mechanical flair for temporary, I stress temporary, repairs and performed miracles of improvisation with wire and nails to keep the exhausted engines turning.

Despite heavy loads and bad road surfaces trucks were driven with dash and verve and usually had a few coolies riding on top of the creaking load, which sometimes slipped and had to be dumped for reloading. Occasionally truck and load overturned completely and several coolies, riding the

timber, were killed in this way. This never discouraged others from the dangerous practice as they seemed to believe it would never happen to them, and if it did, with a fatalistic shrug, well, "Me pen yang"—never mind.

With the completion of carting work and beginning of the hot season in early March, all forest work came to a halt; our elephants left for rest camp to relax until June and we headed for Chiengmai.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TWO MEN IN A BOAT

MY LAST job before going into Chiengmai for hot weather leave was the annual "neap"; the count of timber stocks lying in the Me Ping River north of Chiengmai. This was to start at Ping Kong, a small riverside village, and at this point seventy miles upriver from our destination boats were not much used because of the swift current.

A folding canoe capable of floating in astonishingly few inches of water was sent out from Chiengmai to be my "flagship" and arrived as a tidy mixture of canvas and struts wrapped in an old sack.

My experience of canoeing was limited to half hour jaunts on quiet ponds at seaside resorts and I felt dubious of my ability to cavort amongst rocks and rapids in this flimsy and by no means new structure. A dress rehearsal in assembling the bits seemed indicated and, lacking directions, we spent a perspiring cursing hour in experiments. Finally a boat was made which resembled the vaguely remembered pictures.

It was then collapsed back into its sack and entrusted to the clerk who was to accompany me to Ping Kong next day. We arrived there bright and early, unloaded the sack and sent kit and servants off in the bus. My camp equipment was to travel by bamboo rafts and would be loaded ten miles down-river below the big irrigation dam at Wang Hai, whilst we approached the same spot by canoe for the first night's camp.

By midday we had counted all the logs in the area round Ping Kong and, after assembling the canoe without incident, were ready to move off. Ready but unable; the paddles had gone on in the bus and it took another hour, with villagers helping, to fashion two heavy, club-like slabs of wood mis-named "paddles".

The clerk and myself both admitted to ignorance of this form of travel so, with myself in the rear steering position, we executed a few turns, reversals and sideslips on the quiet pool at the launching site. The canoe shot about like a minnow at our behest so with mounting confidence we nosed it downstream.

A system of orders—"Paddle right, paddle left, etc." seemed to work well enough but in fast water the directions needed to miss one rock on the left and the next one on the right became so complicated that I felt like the raw recruit in the cartoon who whilst drilling a squad found them heading for a cliff and didn't know the word of command to stop them. I felt like saying "Good-bye" to the boat and walking.

The first rapid, a short one, found us approaching sluggishly and, knowing that it was necessary to go faster than the water to maintain steerage way, I yelled to the clerk, in an effort to straighten the boat up, "Paddle hard right". His efforts increased slightly and the boat wouldn't hold straight. Once again "Paddle harder right". At the top of the rapid he was paddling like a dervish and as a result we whizzed down through the foam, but backwards. An eerie sensation and not one I recommend.

The canoe carried on despite our best efforts and when it reached calmer water he was upbraided for his part in the fiasco. He protested that he had been "pedalling" as hard as he could go and was hurt when told, "Sure enough you oaf, but on the wrong side."

A succession of small rapids which were negotiated backwards, sideways and occasionally head-on did little to give us mutual confidence but proved the canoe, with its half deck of canvas, to be almost unsinkable. Very desirable in the circumstances!

Although our proposed camp was only ten miles by road the river nearly doubled with its crazy bends and it was mid-afternoon when we passed Soop Me Palm. The mouth of this creek was a deceptively small gap in a sea of elephant grass giving no hint of the rugged country which it drained. Luckily there were few logs to count on this stretch but this was small consolation. Even our strenuous if somewhat misguided efforts with the paddles, weighing more by the minute, brought us to no known point by dusk and it was full dark when pressure lamps came into view denoting Wang Hai, the camp and the much lamented light-weight paddles. I had had enough on landing, more than enough. In fact plenty too much.

At that time of year one might expect daytime temperatures in the high nineties but nights were still very crisp and mist hung like cotton wool in the river valley till mid-morning. Our start next morning was made in this chilly, clinging vapour but a hearty spell of paddling soon thawed out the blood and, with

good paddles and increasing skill, we made good time through the Chieng Dao plain. We covered well over ten miles, counting as we went, but the river flowing to all points of the compass, had taken us back due north at times, so that at evening the soaring pinnacle of Chieng Dao peak seemed in exactly the same spot as it had occupied at the start of the day.

The next day took us clear of the rice-growing plain and into the Chieng Dao gorge where bigger rapids soon found flaws in our technique. Although the canoe rode the waves like a duck, the framework vibrated alarmingly when we hit really rough water and one had visions of the whole issue folding up like a jack-knife leaving one thoroughly tangled inside. This disturbing vision was to become reality two days later.

At midday we were approaching Keng Pan Tow, the worst rapid north of Chiengmai, and the decision whether to shoot it and trust to luck or take the sensible course and carry the boat several hundred yards round was decided for us. We rounded a bend and surprised a familiar figure absorbing culture from an American comic book as he took his unearned ease beneath a tree. It was no other than our old friend Headman Kim, on his last job before retirement and already practising hard at his future vocation. He was doing some necessary log clearing in the main river and his efficiency was such that he had completely blocked the Me Ping at Keng Pan Tow with several hundred logs.

He was enlisted to carry the canoe round by the main road, which ran along the river bank at this point. The two bamboo rafts were a bigger problem but Kim was sure that, if the kit was manhandled round, he could move the rafts on rollers with the help of his elephants and he was allowed to make the attempt. If he succeeded he would save us at least half a day's work; the time needed to dismantle the rafts and carry them piecemeal for re-assembling below the rapid.

Dragging chains were hitched to each raft and the haul up a gentle slope from the river to the road worked perfectly. Once on the metalled road the discordant screeching of bamboo moving over stone got the elephants really upset and, like cats with tin cans tied to their tails, they took off for distant parts shedding bamboo poles like straws in the wind. We now had the job, not only of remaking rafts but of cutting new bamboos in the jungle and repairs took the rest of the day.

Next morning we completed the gorge section, getting a welcome addition to the diet when a good-sized fish leapt into

the boat, where it was clubbed with such vigour that a hole appeared in the canvas hull. Repairs were simple on a dry day and were achieved by overturning the canoe on a sandbar until the canvas dried out then slapping on rubber solution and adhesive tape.

At noon, with a long lead on the rafts due to the swift current, we stopped for a breather at the Tar Deea tobacco-curing factory where the courteous Siamese in charge was only too pleased to show us round. Groups of Lao girls, twittering away like sparrows, sat in the long grading shed and sorted the leaf into the various grades as it came in from the farms on gaily painted bullock carts. The leaf was then transferred to square, white-washed curing houses and placed in racks for curing at controlled temperatures. We were deluged with technical facts on the processing required, after which we adjourned to the manager's quarters to be fortified with some of his unbonded liquor. This was very pleasant but unwise, as I found once back on the open river in the heat of the afternoon.

Our destination that day was Soop Me Ngat, the mouth of the Ngat creek, and it was at this stage, with scorching hangovers, that we met with the infuriating Eastern trait of complete vagueness over times and distances. By mid afternoon we were tired and hoping that Soop Me Ngat would show up round every bend. We repeatedly asked villagers, cultivating tobacco gardens on the river bank, how far it was. The first man was encouraging with his, "Not far"; the second request, to a party of small children, told us nothing as they fled screaming; then we passed our own rafts drifting blissfully along and without a clue as to their whereabouts. Our next informant was an old crone who, after a significant glance at the sun, said, "Noon tomorrow"; then another youth who chilled us with his "More than a kilometre", an accepted method of meaning a long way without being too accurate.

Further questions were answered in similar vein since etiquette required that some answer be made and a completely wrong one was more polite than no answer at all. A last despairing question of a villager leading home his buffaloes gave us the glad tidings, "This is Soop Ngat".

At its junction with the Me Ping the Me Ngat is a lovely creek with its broad sandy bed, screened by over-arching, feathery bamboo, running like a highway back towards the distant hills and we settled there to await the dawdling rafts.

The pleasure of watching the evening bathing parade helped

to keep my mind from a long overdue meal. The people of the riverine villages of Siam have a great regard for personal cleanliness and a morning and evening bathe is probably the minimum observance. In the morning the women do the day's washing and exchange gossip whilst the men are at work and in the evening the whole village goes down to bathe. This is the social event of the day, with the sexes usually bathing separately and at some small distance from each other.

The women, preceded by naked toddlers who bob around like ducks in the water, arrive at the river in the sarong which they have worn all day. This is tied under the armpits to fall as a fairly shapeless tube to the knees. They carry a second sarong—their evening costume. The transformation from chrysalis to butterfly is quick, and a delight to the eye. Their dry shapeless garment emerges from the plunge as a slick wet clinging sheath and one is well able to appreciate the generally excellent Siamese female contours. The exchange from wet to dry evening sarong is made with a few dexterous wriggles and complete decorum.

Soon after starting next day we snagged an under-water rock, ripped the hull badly, and sank like a stone in shallow water. Some strenuous heaving beached a waterlogged canoe on a sandbar where it was necessary to dismantle the craft completely before we could effect the necessary repairs. After waiting several hours for the sun to disperse the mist and dry out the canvas we were able to seal the hull, rebuild the boat and launch it. We took our seats in the canoe and within seconds, to the accompaniment of a loud crack, were once again on the bottom, luckily in shallow water, and shrouded in canvas and cracked spars. In our haste to get away we had forgotten to bolt some of the main spars and our boat now had a broken back. Once again the boat was dismantled and the repair routine started with cracked struts being lashed together with the invaluable adhesive tape.

With half the day gone we had not achieved anything, but a concentrated effort brought us to Fai Me Feck, a large irrigation dam, by evening. At this point the canoe was dismantled, for the third time that day, and motored into Chiengmai where I was due to start the second lap of the count, a fifty mile stretch of the Me Ping River lying south of the city.

After a couple of days revelry with the teak wallahs who had already arrived in from their distant forests I was once again sitting at the tiller of our invalid craft and floating beneath

Chiengmai bridge. We passed the British Consulate, a gracious white building in beautiful gardens, on the right bank then the barracks, Club, and the Forest Manager's riverside house on the left bank after which we were clear of the city and drifting through the fertile rice plains. Small villages, many of the houses made from stolen teak, dotted the river-bank nestling under protective groves of raintrees.

The river, the main highway for the villagers, was alive with their activities and boats, ranging from canoes hardly big enough for one man to giants hollowed from whole tree trunks, plied a brisk ferry service from bank to bank.

Fishing parties walked the stream in line abreast swinging and casting their weighted nets, which unfolded in the air in beautiful black gauzy patterns, to blanket large expanses of water. These nets pin fish to the river bed and after a bare-footed probe to check what is trapped in them fishermen submerge for long periods to extract the catch. Fish are strung on keep-lines tied to the men's belts and it is a common sight to see fishermen with "tails" of live captive fish wriggling behind them as they wade through the water. Fish breed in enormous numbers in all the rivers so that catches of great size and variety are common but unfortunately the fish, with very few exceptions, are of poor quality and only enjoyable in the hotly spiced Siamese food.

Fishing activities, net making and boat repairing on the sandbars, and the everyday occupations of village life along the banks provided endless interest as we moved down-river, whilst our strange craft came in for much comment from the amphibious villagers. Although the riverine life was interesting there was one custom which didn't amuse us, namely that of tying logs near houses to serve as floating platforms which acted as landing stages, laundries and lavatories. Checking the ownership of such logs provided us with some odoriferous work and the mirth of the villagers, who realized our predicament, added insult to injury.

The routine of daily counts and nightly camps on the clean golden sandbars, laid bare by a falling river, went on uneventfully until we reached Soop Me Karn, where the large Karn creek added its waters to the Me Ping. Here we came across a log, ours, which lay within a few yards of a house and was in course of being sawn up by thieves. Though there was no thief in sight we were able to question the woman of the house about it. She answered our queries, with sublime indifference as to whether or not we believed her poker-faced lying.

She said that she knew of no stolen log (it was in her garden); that she had never seen thieves at work on it or heard them and, short of thumbscrews and the rack, this seemed to be all she would tell us. After likening her to the Three Wise Monkeys we moved on, noting down "One log stolen" as it was quite obvious that some group of enterprising villagers would have it sawn into planks and incorporated in a house long before we could arrange to reclaim it.

This type of petty theft, almost unknown before the Second World War, was to blossom in the following year into what became known, almost with horror amongst the timber companies, as "The Year of the Great Steal". A year when whole villages combined in what appeared to be a spontaneous outbreak of timber stealing; when log losses were computed in thousands and whole blocks of new teak houses appeared in many villages.

Anti-theft measures were on a huge and expensive scale involving scores of policemen, speedboat patrols and aircraft reconnaissance, but, in the face of thousands of active thieves (who considered it no great crime to build their houses of Siamese teak, albeit paid for by foreign firms) and more thousands of indifferent and unsympathetic villagers, it became almost a superhuman task to guard our logs along the hundred miles of river where stealing was most concentrated. Only the assistants involved in this unrewarding work (I was not amongst them), could guess how exhausting and frustrating it was to spend days and nights trying to catch thieves in flooded swamps, or in trying to sort the grain of truth from the tissue of lies told by scores of gay and carefree liars all telling the same yarn.

One of the difficulties in suppressing timber theft was the relatively light scale of sentences. A captured thief could not pay back the value of the stolen timber, nor could he pay a large fine so the sentence was usually a term of imprisonment when the man was proved guilty. This term was about six months, though rather more for ringleaders, and, as is provided for by Siamese law, his sentence was reduced by half if the man pleaded guilty, thus giving him a three months' "stretch".

Many villagers must have thought it well worth taking the risk of capture and gaol when they could build a house, worth several years' pay, from tax-free stolen timber. We felt that if sentences had been really stiff all but a very few hard cases would have been deterred at the outset and certainly the vast

losses in revenue suffered both by the firms and the Government would have been avoided.

A short paddle from the stolen log brought us to Fai Soop Karn (*Fai* meaning a bamboo irrigation barrage) made by driving thousands of stakes into the river bed to form a kind of hedgehog barrier across the flow of water, and we landed to inspect it. This "Fai", the biggest on the river, held back a fair-sized lake from which water was led away through irrigation canals to thousands of acres of thirsty paddy land.

By law all structures blocking a navigable waterway must have an opening for the use of rivercraft and it was this "navigable channel" that we were interested in. This term can be elastically interpreted and in the case of Fai Soop Karn imagination had been stretched to the full. The surge of broken water between jagged bamboo walls might have served a fresh run salmon but pleased me not at all.

The alternative was a long hot portage round the structure and, being somewhat impatient, I decided to go down the channel. Our skill in handling the canoe was by now not inconsiderable and as we could both swim no alarm was felt at the prospect. The canoe nosed into the opening and shot down the middle of the channel at impressive speed. It went down and kept on going down so that, in a matter of seconds, we were swimming in the pool below the dam. Our much abused canoe had been speared by a loose bamboo on the way down the slide and dived straight to the bottom. Amphibious villagers salvaged the craft for us and once again we gave first aid to the grievously wounded boat.

A few more days travelling brought us to Soop Me Chem, mouth of the Chem creek, and here the battle-scarred and much bandaged canoe was dismantled for the last time and loaded on to a waiting bus for the return to Chiengmai. The last two hundred miles of river down as far as Paknampoh, our main rafting station, were to be counted by one man who had the dubious pleasure of travelling upstream and walking the whole way, taking more than a month on the job.

Our trip into Chiengmai was made in fiesta spirit with all hands looking forward to three weeks in the bright lights before setting out on a three months' jungle tour at the start of the next rainy season.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SHORT STAY AND RAPID DEPARTURE

AT THE beginning of June, 1951, with cash and medicine boxes loaded, and with a full complement of servants and coolies, I moved off by bus heading southwest from Chiengmai to start up a new forest area.

The road could fairly be described as awful and was only to be navigated at a good speed. In that way we would bounce along the tops of the corrugations and transferred most of the agony to the overworked suspension system. Any great reduction in speed resulted in steering wobble and tooth-loosening vibrations.

We made reasonable time to Chomtong, a small wayside village which was the traditional halt for drivers wanting a belated breakfast, and I toyed with a coffee whilst our driver demolished a mountain of rice, meat and chili peppers. Soon after leaving Chomtong we skated off the road, against the driver's wishes, and stopped to find a front tyre impregnated with nails and quite flat. We had suffered for the sins of others. During the dry weather heavily laden timber trucks and transport buses had been racing through the small roadside hamlets raising dust clouds, which hung in the air for hours, and scattering stones from the loose road surface with the force of sling-shot. Several villagers had been hit in this way and their frequent protests to bus owners about the nuisance had had no effect.

In retaliation the villagers had placed bamboo poles, with lines of projecting nails, across the road and scattered triangular double-pointed nails with generous hands. The colossal number of punctures and blowouts soon earned the co-operation of the bus owners who henceforth drove sedately in built-up areas, but no attempt was made to clear "unexploded mines" so that punctures were the order of the day in that area for months afterwards. No one of course had the faintest notion as to why the nails occurred in such quantities along this short stretch of road and one cynic went so far as to suggest that maybe the soil was suitable there and they just grew—like cactus!

After repairs we crossed the broad Me Chem creek on a distinctly pensionable Bailey bridge then on through the outskirts of Muang Hawt. Muang Hawt was a very important trade town and garrison in the days when Siam was warring with Burma, but, with better communications, has now declined into a sleepy riverside village dominated by old ruined temples and an enormous Buddha, evidence of former glory.

The Buddha, seated with his back resolutely to the main road, had presented a mark for some amateur marksmen, maybe the Sons of Heaven during the Second World War, and the back was generously pitted with holes that might well have been made by small cannon fire. The numerous pock marks in the thirty-foot-high back were gradually filled in and with the addition, several years later, of seasonal yellow robes and a protective roof the Buddha was once again able to present a calm and enigmatic exterior.

A second halt was made at Wang Loong, sixty miles south of Chiengmai, where a last-minute purchase of vegetables was made by Nai Seng, the cook, who, having spent his last night in Chiengmai on the spree, had managed to forget half his kitchen utensils and most of his fresh produce and was busy trying to pass the blame on to his innocent little coolie boy who burst into tears. The cook, with his few blackened teeth and cropped hair, was a hardened campaigner.

Wang Loong is a thriving, end of the motor road, village which has supplanted Muang Hawt in present importance and is the market centre for the Karen and Mooser hill tribes who live in the hills bordering the Me Chem creek, amongst the highest mountains in Siam, and cultivate their gardens of maize and opium up to more than five thousand feet on the slopes of Doi Inthanon.

This mountain, the highest in the country, is named after a one-time sovereign chief of Chiengmai and rises to more than eight thousand feet. Its Lao name, Doi Angkar, always appealed to me much more, and means the Hill of the Crater of the Crows.

The hill folk appear in Wang Loong in tribal finery adding a bizarre and colourful note to the local market. Karen men in sarongs, white jackets, and headcloths of many colours were followed, in single file, by their women who were clad in beautifully made tunics of yellow and red chequer-board cloth overlaid with stitched patterns of the white hard seeds of Job's Tears.

The Mooser men in black leggings, black trousers and jackets, red cummerbunds, black quilted skull caps with red pompon and usually a long sword slung under the left shoulder by a cord, preceded their women, again in single file regardless of the width of the street, who wore scarlet leggings, baggy smocks, wide blue Tibetan-style turbans and most of the family wealth in the form of heavy silver neck and arm bands. All chewed betel nut to the point where their teeth had been stained jet-black and blood-red splashes of expectorated juice marked their progress down the village street.

Wang Loong was the terminus of the motor road proper but a cart track, leading about five miles further south to Ban En, could be driven over by a bus during the dry weather at some risk to the springs. The narrow track was deeply grooved by the high-wheeled country carts and a slip into these ruts would have fractured the undercarriage beyond repair but somehow the expected mishap never quite occurred and, by dint of some grinding low gear work, we arrived safely at Ban En. Here my kit was off-loaded on the river bank whilst the travelling boat, which was to take us the rest of the way, poled up to the landing.

Hot and bumpy though the ride had been I was able to reflect that the teak wallahs of twenty years earlier, when no motor roads existed outside Chiangmai town, would have loaded elephants direct from their house verandas and trudged for eight or ten days, much more in times of flood, to reach Ban En and spent a similar period in reaching the northern Me Palm forests.

The waiting river boat, like others of its kind, was a long low rather piratical craft, with a high-peaked prow, open fore-deck, covered cargo space amidships and a roofed rear deck where the steersman and his huge sweep oar left little space for first-class passengers.

By the time my kit had been handled aboard the smooth lines of the boat were obliterated by dangling crates of chickens, hanging baskets and festoons of coolies on the upper-works. A charcoal brazier, presided over by the villainous cook, was fuming on the fore-deck ready to produce tea or coffee on demand and left just enough room for the oarsmen to sit cross-legged at their sweeps.

We got away to a late start and, with the low water stranding us at every sandbar, made little distance that day. We decided on Ban Nong as our first night's camp and the late hour of our

arrival, coupled with the littered state of the sandbars, decided me in favour of a night's rest in the local temple. In Siam a traveller is usually welcome to sleep in the temple precincts, though this favour is really confined to men only since women are not allowed within temple limits after dark.

Wat Ban Nong followed the basic pattern of most other Siamese temples in having a massive brick, lime-washed boundary wall enclosing the temple, a conical pagoda and priests' quarters. Round the inside of the wall ran a roofed shelter for the use of travellers and the other buildings were spaced about a sanded courtyard. The temple, a little gem of its kind, was a white-walled edifice lighted by tiny windows set under a high-peaked roof. Most of the artistry was lavished on the front entrance and surrounding wall with gilded dragons, gods and mythical animals competing with glittering tile-work and carved teak friezes to form an eye-filling spectacle.

The head priest was kind enough to allow me to sleep inside the temple on this and many later occasions and we struck up a firm acquaintance in time. He considered that the loan of my wireless, presents of used battery cells and small monetary offerings for lodgings were unnecessary, but a nice gesture none the less.

By dusk I had organized myself in one corner of the main chamber and was seated in a camp-chair surrounded by odds and ends of camp furniture. The pressure lamp, roaring steadily on the table, illuminated the lower parts of ornately painted wooden pillars and white walls, and golden gleams from the bronze Buddha images came reflecting out of the surrounding gloom.

The arrival of shaven-headed, yellow-robed priests and novices for evening prayers lent further interest to an already fascinating setting. The novices, quite young boys mainly, were undergoing a period of religious instruction, common to Siamese youths, which might last from three months to as long as two years, after which time most would return to their homes whilst a dedicated few would enter the priesthood.

My presence had a rather unsettling effect on the novices but eventually all were knelt facing a senior priest and giving responses to his chants. Like all boys in church, regardless of creed, there were several not immediately under the priest's eye indulging in nudges and giggles, which brought to mind my own defections at choir practices many years before.

The deep rising and falling notes of the timeless chant, with

its monotonous repetition of precepts, were pleasant, soothing and far from monotonous and were originally devised as a means of teaching the Buddhist religion to a largely illiterate people. With lamplight shining yellow on flowing robes, shining shaven heads and glinting images, and with the distant corners of the chamber in Stygian gloom, the music blended perfectly into the setting to leave an unforgettable impression.

With the departure of the priests the silence was broken only by squeaking bats flitting in and out through the open temple door, the silvery tinkle of small bells hung round the roof eaves as they caught a vagrant breeze, and the dry rustling of fronds high up in some invisible palm tree within the compound. I slept well under the watchful eyes of the Buddhas, symbols of a religion not my own but a good and kindly one for all that.

Next day we left the tail end of the Chiengmai rice plain behind and moved into wild country, diving down several small rapids as we went. These were the forerunners of the main Me Ping rapids still many miles to the south. In the afternoon we ground to halt on a shingle bar with the intention of spending a night in the newly-built Company bungalow, perched on the bank above us, but such was its morbid situation under a dark, creaking bamboo grove and so poor its workmanship that it was torn down for erection elsewhere and I tented for the night.

Next midday, having reached the lower limits of my new forest, we halted and made camp in a flourishing maize garden on the banks of the Huay Oom Peh, the Goat creek. Subsequent inspection of this creek, with its series of huge waterfalls, confirmed its suitability for mountain goats, if little else.

The contractor I was hoping to meet had not arrived, tomorrow maybe, I was told, and rather than wait during several weeks of tomorrows we turned the boat on the slow upstream trip. Poles, long steel-tipped bamboos, were now substituted for oars and each poleman in turn marched up on to the high-peaked prow, dug his pole in the river bed and marched towards the stern to push the boat upriver beneath his straining feet. One man was immediately replaced by another so that the three men kept up a constant thrust. This type of upstream travel must be one of the slowest forms of transport known to man, especially in swift water, and is exhausting work for the polemen. So much so that after an hour of driving the one ton

boat against the current they must stop for half an hour's rest at least.

Our upstream voyage was interrupted at the mouth of each side-creek whilst I made a flying inspection trip inside to get the lie of the land and in this way we made perhaps a mile per day so that the return trip to Ban En, the top of my forest limits, took a good two weeks.

Contractors were filtering in slowly but by July all were in action and the forest was fairly buzzing with activity. In early August, when the forest was a going concern, I was ordered to proceed to our Raheng rafting station more than a hundred miles further south.

Near the end of my stay in this rather characterless forest, with its short side-creeks running down to the well-populated banks of the Me Ping River, I almost saw the last of my faithful terrier, Joe, when he was reckless enough to take on a village buffalo on its own ground—belly deep in swamp mud. His mobility was that of a fly in treacle but he persisted in his charge until an outraged buffalo found a blackened evil-smelling dog hung grimly on to one of its ears. With a ludicrous squeak, which seems to be the only vocal note of these huge beasts, it swung a pair of outsize horns and impaled Joe, who was lifted high in the air, shot off the end of a horn and kept flying until he landed upside down in the mud still howling his battle song.

My own floundering had brought me near enough to administer some mean jabs with the steel tip of my walking stick, before it could give Joe further attention, and at this unsporting treatment it trampled off to the sanctuary of still deeper mud leaving me to carry an almost defunct terrier back to camp. The horn had entered under the belly, slid round the rib-cage and emerged on top of the shoulder blade, miraculously missing all the vital spots. After several weeks devoted attention, when he was carried everywhere in a basket, Joe, with only a six-inch scar to show as a souvenir, was back in action enthusiastically harrying buffaloes as of yore. He had a glorious vacuum between the ears and never seemed to learn a thing from his various batterings.

One tragic incident marred my stay in this particular forest and resulted in one of our workmen being drowned. This man had arrived from an upriver camp carrying mail one day—a rather simple-minded chap, and subject, though I was not aware of it, to epileptic fits. He had gone to bathe on the evening

of his arrival with the other camp staff who were sporting around in a deep pool just out of the main current of the fast-flowing monsoon river and from my tent on the high bank the whole party were clearly visible.

Suddenly, in the midst of the bathing party, the man vanished before my eyes and, apart from an eruption of bubbles, that was the last that was ever seen of him. Search parties were sent downstream for miles and the pool was thoroughly probed but several days search showed a complete blank. One could only conclude that he had suffered an attack of epilepsy in the water and been dragged down in the main current. The extreme suddenness and complete finality of the mishap gave everyone a severe shock.

After settling the formalities with the local authorities, and notifying the dead man's kin, I handed over the forest to Rogers, another assistant, and turned my boat downriver again towards Raheng. With the rapids ahead, an unknown quantity as far as I was concerned, it was desirable to feel complete confidence in my boat crew and the man in charge of the boat seemed a weak link.

Nai Nen, a wrinkled gnome of a man with a permanent cud of betel nut bulging one cheek, had undoubtedly an encyclopaedic knowledge of the rapids, having navigated Company boats up and down them for twenty or more years, but I had some qualms as to whether his aged and shrunken muscles could cope with the long sweep oar, weighing much more than he did, if the going got really rough.

On the high, monsoon water we made excellent time to camp for the night at Ban Khor, right at the top of the rapids proper. The night was peaceful enough except for regular soft splashing from the river's edge but not until morning did I discover the origin of the noise. The river had been chewing away at the sandbar all night, collapsing chunks of it into the water, hence the splashing, and what had been a nobly proportioned football pitch at dusk was an undersized tennis court at dawn. Everyone else had retired to the boat to sleep during the night but seemed to consider that I would value a sound sleep more than safety so had left me unaware that the river was rising and the sandbar falling.

Rivermen, staunch individualists almost to a man, can seldom be persuaded to start out before the sun is showing over the horizon. They had however been very busy at the mooring that morning in building barriers round the open-sided decks

to prevent waves sweeping into the cargo hold. With this task completed to their liking the whole crew went to the village temple, built on a rocky promontory over the river, to sue for a safe passage. Then followed a hearty breakfast with the men squatting round a communal rice-bowl on the foredeck and finally, with the edge of the sun grinning over a jungle-clad hilltop, we were ready to go.

We nosed downstream and straight into the first rapid, situated on a sharp bend within sight of the village. Keng Khor, the elbow rapid (*Keng* being a standard prefix meaning rapid) is a smallish one which, apart from rocking the boat along at fine speed, produced no excitement.

Then followed a sedate glide along a long smooth reach as we moved into progressively wilder country. Precipitous jungle-clad hills rose out of the water on both banks, outcropping in places as limestone cliffs, red streaked with iron deposits, which soared as much as 1,500 feet sheer to overawe the traveller. In such surroundings sunlight was a rare visitor before midday and man and his work seemed puny indeed.

The elements added further emphasis to an already overpowering setting. An upstream wind, funnelling between the high cliffs, could work up to an invisible strength which took complete charge of a boat, holding it like a vice against the combined efforts of current and oarsmen to move it down-river. The water, rolling sullenly in its narrow, rock-confined bed, looked smooth enough until one saw the surface being pocked by foaming boils of water which erupted to spew forth bits of flotsam for a short surface trip before sucking them greedily back into the depths. The tremendous power of conflicting currents at work beneath the deceptively smooth surface could well be imagined. It was definitely not a place to fall into.

The first major rapid was encountered at Keng Chang Hong, the Trumpeting Elephant rapid, and situated as it was on a long bend we could see the whole length of it down to the quiet pool at its tail. There was no obstacle blocking the channel so we headed straight for the broken water; a smooth lurch and tip over the sill dumped the prow in white water and started us on a boiling rush with the three oarsmen pulling their hearts out and giving tongue like a pack of hounds as the spray broke over the prow and dashed against their backs. A poleman, balancing like a trapeze artist on the tip of the heaving prow, fended off threatening rocks when necessary and added his voice to the battlesong. Nai Nen plied his sweep like a Dervish

on the afterdeck and, though hauling so hard at times that his departure overboard seemed imminent, kept silent whilst maintaining a blood-red stream of betel juice from between his dyed lips. I occupied myself with plans as to how I would handle that hundredweight of teaken oar when he vanished!

With alternating patches of calm, sullen water we gave repeat performances at Keng Puang and Keng Chang. At the latter place there was a break in the encroaching hills and on the gentler slopes there was evidence of ancient cultivation and of a vanished but considerable civilization. It seems certain that centuries ago there was a big city at Keng Soi, the centre of a vast tract of cultivated hill country, but this is visible now only as ruined and half-buried temples set in encroaching jungle. The former inhabitants were Buddhists but not Siamese, possibly Lawah though even this is not certain, and questions as to whence from, why departed and whither bound are still to be answered.

As we moved through this anciently settled area I became aware of a steady roar some half a mile ahead and when we pulled into the bank the steersman considered "Keng Soi" sufficient explanation for our halt. This rapid, named after the Soi fish which are trapped in tens of thousands there at the end of each rains, is the longest and most dangerous of the whole series and is approached round a blind corner.

The gnome-like Nai Nen and his muscular No. 2, the poleman, went off anxiously to survey the celebrated torrent and took considerable time over the job. Having seen the tremendous water power in the rapids already negotiated I could well understand their desire to know that the channel was free of obstructions as, once over the sill and moving down, no power on earth short of total wreck and sinking could have stopped the boat. They returned to say that, as the various timber companies were free floating thousands of logs through the rapids that year, they had had to check their route with extra care. An incautious descent to meet a log jam blocking the channel would have meant one boat wrecked and one full complement drowned.

With a final remark from me, as near as I could make it of "Take it easy boys", we moved round the blind corner. An appalling waste of white water met the eye, relieved only by black and intimidating boulders placed, it seemed, in the most awkward sites possible. One could tell from the strained faces and tenseness of the crew that this rapid, familiar to all of them,

was regarded as a hostile enemy at all times, and with good cause. More than a few lives had been lost in it over the years.

The boat, a big thirty-five footer, bored its nose into the welter of foam, going like a speed boat, and rocked and tossed like a live thing; the oarsmen produced the most eldritch shrieking to date and pulled as if their lives depended on their performance, as indeed they did. The prow dug deep through waves, and solid water, rolled over the barriers to put out my charcoal stove then inundate my baggage and servants. I just prayed "To every watery God" the whole way down the quarter mile length. We emerged at the tail of the rapid into a tremendous swirl of water which whipped the boat round in its tracks and hard up against a sandbank where it was quickly tied up. I felt very much like joining in the primeval howl of triumph emitted by the crew. We had dared and won and it was a good feeling.

During my later trips Keng Soi, at high water, always disturbed me just as thoroughly as on that first ride. Certainly familiarity never bred contempt, or anything remotely resembling it!

Keng Oom Loo followed, then Soop Tun, the mouth of the Tun creek. This flows into the Me Ping River in secretive fashion through a break in the cliffs and I got a short glimpse inside the creek, with its high, midstream sentinel rock guarding the approaches, but little thought that most of my time and energy during the next four years would be devoted to felling timber fifty miles inside and getting it out past that pillar of rock.

There was little time for observation as we had flitted past and were already in Keng Soop Tun, a mean rock-spiked rapid, then, shortly after, Keng Ab Nang was signalled ahead. A quick glance at the Bathing Princess rapid suggested that our destruction was certain. Overhanging cliffs rise straight out of the water here with the river smashing into their bases then being reflected round a right-angled bend. It is a very short, but very unpleasant rapid.

Here everything depended on the poleman spearing the cliff at the right moment to deflect the bows round the bend, when the onus was passed to the steersman who had to fight the sweep to hold the stern off the rocks by brute force. Here my qualms about Nai Nen's shrunken muscles were justified. The bows swung round beautifully, as if on rails, but the sweep oar took complete charge of Nai Nen and whipped him into the air

then slammed him down on the deck at my feet. The thatched canopy over our heads hit the cliff a solid crunch and debris showered on us from a mangled roof. A crate of chickens tied to it was torn off and the birds sank like so many stones but we had little time to worry about them. I suspected that my performance would be rather stone-like if I fell in that maelstrom, and added my strength to Nen's at the tiller. Before the emergency had time to develop we had been swept through the rapid and into quieter water below and we could tie up to bale out and repair the damage.

Allowing for changes of scene at the different rapids our method of progress was standardized into exciting, vocal, spray-scattering passages down the rough water with breathing spaces in the quiet intervening reaches. In this way we accounted for the almost unbroken succession of boulder-strewn channels formed by Keng Pa Mon, Song Quare, Oke Mar and Pak Viak (The Barren Cliff, Two Channels, Horse's Chest and Viak stream mouth rapids, in that order). Then Tala Luang and on to the long curving surge of Keng Tala Noi to emerge in the circular pool which takes its name from the Kan Bet, The Fishing Rod, a tremendous pinnacle rising straight out of the pool at the left bank.

Many years earlier a young, suction-footed teak wallah had scaled this pinnacle, which certainly deserves its name, and planted a Company house-flag on the summit. This was done in much the same spirit that incites the undergraduates to hang bedroom utensils, the unbreakable kind for choice, on dreaming University spires, but some evil colonial intent was attributed to the gesture and police were sent to take it down. The ascent was beyond them and the teak wallah declined to stick his neck out a second time so that the flag had to stay there till it rotted.

Next we toiled through Bor Lom, the Well of the Winds, aptly named for its strong eddying air currents, then finally Keng Tar Toom. We emerged from this, like a cork leaving a champagne bottle, and back into the sights and sounds of civilization after thirty miles of splendid isolation, containing thirty-two named rapids in the course of the six-hundred-foot descent.

Here, at the highest point on the Me Ping River where teak logs could be caught and rafted, working launches bearing the flags of the various timber firms were busy assembling timber into rafts. A launch came out from the bank to meet our craft

in midstream. The *Farmooie* was a handsome white greyhound of a boat and sported a pot of the purple orchid from which it took its name. The captain said that he had orders to tow me the last fifty miles into Raheng and thought he could get me in that evening.

With a long length of manilla rope connecting the two boats the *Farmooie* opened up to such an extent that the heavily laden pole-boat was almost dragged under. At this my crew, sons and grandsons of rivermen, heaped insults on the head of the "water-borne engine driver" in the launch ahead, who seemed nigh to achieving what the worst rapids in the country had failed to do, and a more moderate speed was set.

We chugged past Bannar, where the deserted old Company house was just visible on a high bank behind its sheltering screen of rain trees, then through a rugged gorge to emerge in flatter country at Tar Pooie. Below this point the Me Ping slowed to a sedate pace as the half-mile-wide sandy-coloured river meandered on to the northern end of the Bangkok plain. Riverside villages, with the houses raised on stilts along the water's edge, became more numerous as we progressed southwards but at dusk Raheng was still miles away. Speed was reduced when darkness fell and, with the launch searchlight probing the black river ahead, and with frequent changes of direction and speed as the captain felt out the channel, we were soon in trouble.

The pole-boat over-ran the towing line and wrapped it lovingly round the launch propeller. The engine was turned off hurriedly, and the searchlight with it, to leave us drifting in a nerve-shattering calm. Two of the polemen slipped into the water to go hand-over-hand along the hawser towards the invisible launch and, having reached it, dived to free the fouled propeller. This operation involved the undesirable risk, to them, of being washed away from the boats and away downstream where they would not have been easy to locate, but the thought hardly dented their composure, and a few lengthy underwater trips enabled them to clear the screw and allow the launch to get under way again.

The river unwound endlessly and I fell asleep in sheer boredom to be awakened by the launch siren blasting out to notify workmen to meet us at the Company landing for the unloading. All I could see of Raheng was its riverside lights reflecting in the water and, to my mind, they form the best view the town has to offer.

The Company house had been prepared for my arrival and I moved in without delay. Built in the previous century by Louis T. Leonowens, son of the celebrated Anna who was governess to the children of King Mongkut and who has been chronicled romantically if somewhat inaccurately in book, film and play; it was an enduring monument in teak to solid and unimaginative building. Inured as I was to a certain amount of discomfort in jungle dwellings, I found this dark and echoing barn vastly less comfortable than a well-pitched tent, and considered an immediate move on to the lawn, but was too weary to pursue the idea. The resident rats and lizards in the roof, and the teeming mosquitoes probably found it a luxurious residence. The latter certainly challenged my right to be there and enforced an early retreat to my mosquito net where I went to sleep with the catchline of a popular tune on my mind: "There'll be some changes made."

## CHAPTER SIX

### FLOATING HARVEST

THE SURVEY of the house next morning did little to convince me that it was habitable; the high, dirt-encrusted walls of the main room, the dark gloomy bedrooms flanking it; and the dim, covered passageway leading to primitive kitchen quarters would have made a fine setting for a horror play.

It had one uniquely interesting feature; the veranda posts were stamped with the names, at appropriate height levels, of more than a hundred travellers who had stayed in the house in sixty years prior to the Second World War and ranged all the way from a gigantic Dane of 6 ft. 7 in., through a petite Mrs. X of 4 ft. 10 in., down to Master X at 3 ft. 2 in.

In contrast to the house itself, the view over the veranda was beautiful; one looked across a broad lawn, out over the Me Ping River and our launches tied up at the landing, to the double peaks of The Twins in the middle distance, then on again to blue-green jungle hills in the far distance.

The offices, situated under the house, were much more immaculate and quite encouraging. During the season they fairly buzzed with the comings and goings of rafters and to a newcomer to this branch of the teak industry like myself Nai Samarn, our head rafting clerk, proved to be a mine of information.

Behind the office was a medley of clerks' houses, and off to one side squatted the long, low canoes godown housing the tens of thousands of canes needed to tie our logs into rafts. These canes were collected in the deepest of evergreen jungle where the spiny creeper, from which they were cut, trailed along the ground to bind the surrounding foliage into impenetrable thickets. The creeper is just about the most untypical member of the Palm family, to which it belongs. Canes were classified into various sizes, coiled into spindle-shaped rolls, then sold to the timber companies at the start of each rafting season as dry and brittle strands of little strength. Once soaked in water they swelled to take on great strength and some elasticity which proved them ideal for rafting purposes.

When I first arrived in Raheng in 1951 the town, a provincial centre of some ten thousand people, offered little of interest, being but a large replica of any other riverside village with its long market of open-fronted wooden shops, a second-rate hotel, and a general confusion of houses. Five years later when I departed the place for the last time it had altered almost beyond recognition and, largely due to the drive of a new provincial governor, boasted concrete highways, new public buildings, an airport and a power-plant. It was definitely on the map.

Our own H.Q. was on the northern outskirts of the town at an interesting racial boundary; to the north were the Lao-speaking people and to the south the Siamese clustered about the market which, like almost all markets in the East, was financially dominated by the industrious Chinese. Our large compound had the river at the bottom of the garden, often in the garden at flood time, and the extensive Raheng swamp, breeding ground of countless millions of malarial mosquitoes, at the back door.

The swamp, five square miles of reed-covered water interspersed with clumps of tall swamp grass and islands of firmer ground supporting a few trees, had a large duck population but the shooting and retrieving of these made unproductive sport. There was one other form of sport available on the swamp, now seldom practised, which was described to me by a man who had taken part in it.

The hunting of crocodiles, in their most northerly habitat in Siam, was carried out at night. Canoes were nosed quietly through the reeds, with pitch flares and head lamps lighting the oily water, until one of the saurians revealed itself. It was then stalked until the men were near enough to spear it to death before hauling it into a flimsy canoe. The rewards of this sport were danger, excitement and commercially valuable skins. These crocodiles, growing up to about eight feet in length, are not normally aggressive to man, but one can well imagine that an injured, angry one could make short work of a lightweight canoe with its armoured tail and thoroughly mangle the occupants in the process.

Such then was the setting in which I found myself learning the rafting routine. After a week or so, having read all the files and feeling depressed by the gloomy house, I hitched the *Farmooie* on to a pole-boat carrying my staff and headed up-river on inspection with Nai Sanoh, elsewhere referred to as

the "water-borne engine driver", at the wheel. This term was a gross libel on a man who had spent forty years navigating the Me Ping River in all weathers, and he smarted under the insult for some time.

We passed rafts by the score; some tied up with the men eating a morning meal, others already moving down, yet others broken in half where faulty navigation had wrapped them around sandbars, and rafts in all stages of construction. The pencil-nosed launch ploughed a steady furrow upriver and midday found us passing Pak Wang, the mouth of the Wang creek, which is a major river in its own right, but which creeps into the Me Ping as a narrow canal half hidden by tall elephant grass; then on again through the long, island-studded straight to Tar Pooie village, one house deep, half a mile long, and effectively sited beneath sheltering trees. Here the Me Ping surged out of the last foothills of the northern mountains on to the lowland plains and the *Farmooie*, with a dragging pole-boat, hardly made headway at times. We persevered and after a long day on the move tied up at Bannar at the Company landing stage.

Our house was situated in the northern suburbs of Bannar, in Tar Piman district and, with the translation meaning Paradise Landing, seldom can a place have been more misnamed. The house, almost an identical gloomy twin of the Raheng barn, sheltered us for the night and we moved on next day for Tar Toom—the bottom of the rapids and the top salvage station.

The catching and rafting of logs was almost the final task of the Upcountry staff in the long business of moving timber, from a parent stump somewhere high on the northern hills, on its way to Bangkok. Normally a log took three or four years on the journey but buried logs, unearthed as old sandbars were washed away, appeared at intervals and some of these had been on the trip for fifteen years or more.

Behind the arrival of logs into rafting areas was a steady programme of felling, dragging, carting and river driving which moved the timber each year so as to get a gradual input. Logs from the Me Palm for instance had to travel nearly two hundred miles before nosing their red clay-stained bulks into Tar Toom, whilst others had a relatively short trip, and movements had to be contrived so as to prevent an unmanageable spate of timber arriving with a rush.

On large rises the river made its own plans, often sabotaging

our carefully laid schemes in most thorough fashion. At such times the salvage staff at Tar Toom was swamped as thousands of logs crashed through the rapid just above the salvage station, and villagers all the way to Raheng were busy catching and tying up our timber.

The catching, or salvaging, was done either on a bend of the river where logs floated close in to the bank, or from a launch in midstream. In the latter case a launch would stand out in mid-river with ten to twenty men aboard. Each man was briefly clad in a loin cloth and carried a wooden paddle and a long piece of cane. As the launch manoeuvred close to a floating log a man dived overboard, swam to the log, tied his cane through the dragging holes at one end of it, climbed aboard and paddled the log ashore. This went on until all the men had got a log each then the launch collected another batch of men from the bank.

This work may sound simple enough in basic detail but the swim through surging water, and the seated balancing-act on a rolling log required a skill which had been passed down through generations of rivermen. When a log neared the bank the man riding it seized the loose end of his cane and made impressive swimming speed ashore to snub his line round any convenient tree stump and bring the captive log into "oo", collecting point.

This performance, repeated tens of thousands of times each season, rescued our annual harvest of timber from a free-floating passage to Paknampoh, our main rafting station some two hundred miles further south. As stocks of salvaged logs mounted, the building of rafts got under way.

Authorized rafters searched around for long perfect logs with which to build the raft head—the nucleus of the raft, situated at the extreme stern, on to which the body of the raft was added. These logs, double lashed to heavy cross spars, were carefully assembled as they supported, in addition to the anchor rope attachment, the captain's steering perch atop a bamboo tripod and the crew's living quarters. All hands made sure that their small bamboo shack was based on a seaworthy clump of logs so that, in the event of a complete smash-up, they could at least salvage their personal possessions.

With the head in place, clumps of logs were towed into position by launch and over a period of days the raft grew into a cigar-shaped craft three hundred feet in length, eighty feet at its widest point and some three hundred tons in weight. This

drifting and wayward craft was managed on the move by two polemen, who floated along some hundred yards to the rear, ready to dig their anchor-poles into the river bed to stop or turn the raft on orders from the captain atop his perch.

When all was ready for departure the crew went to the local temple to receive priestly blessings for a safe voyage. Then, having covered themselves religiously, they made offerings to the water spirits in the form of a miniature raft which was floated downriver carrying portions of food, tobacco and a lighted stick of incense—to take care of the supernatural. The crew then moved aboard to live on the raft whilst awaiting suitable travelling waters.

Their small shack, only scant inches above the gurgling water, was crammed with equipment; bedrolls, sacks of rice, pestle and mortar for pounding chilis, cooking oil, dried meats, spare canes in case of a break-up, clothing, knives, axes, and a beaten earth fireplace in one corner. With the addition of four or five men the overcrowding was complete.

The men waited days, sometimes weeks, before the water was judged suitable but finally the steel cable securing the raft to the bank was cast off and kedging into midstream started. The two anchor-men, each with his long pointed pole attached to a hundred yards of twisted cane hawser, dug themselves in in midstream and swung the raft out on the ends of twanging anchor ropes in obedience to hand-signalled directions. One man, far ahead on the bows, toiled manfully with a long bamboo stave helping to move the bows round, and the last member of the crew doubled up as cook and hauler. He had to drag the water-logged hawsers inboard and coil them when an anchor man wanted to change position.

The captain, from his "crow's nest" could see the line of the main channel and when the raft was headed into it he gave the signal for "Up anchors" to start the craft on its two hundred mile voyage. With good waters, skilful handling and luck the trip might be completed in two weeks, but with adverse factors this time might be stretched into several months and, in extreme cases, a raft might never arrive at all. Frequent break-ups, or trouble amongst the crew sometimes discouraged them to the pitch that they deserted *en masse* so that their raft had to be broken up and added to other passing rafts.

The anchor men swam and floated the whole way, working in shifts, and the sight of these men in action gave me one of my most enduring memories of teak rafting. Needless to say they

were all superlative swimmers and had a trick of their own for getting through the water. When a man wished to change position he could do so by digging his thirty-foot pole into the river bed, tilting it in the required direction, then, by travelling along it hand over hand he ranged about at impressive speed.

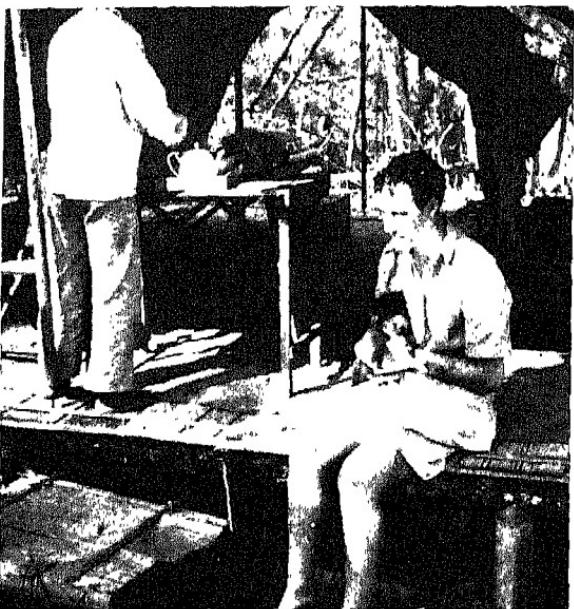
On easy straights the raft was allowed to drift, with the water-soaked hawsers coiling like giant water snakes on their bamboo floats, and the men taking it easy as they lay half asleep along their poles. It was an unforgettable sight to see two disembodied heads floating far behind each raft, bobbing like corks in the wash of passing launches, and wearing straw hats and sunglasses to deaden the terrific glare off the water. Cigarettes and matches were carried under the hat but even knowing this, there was something quite unreal about seeing hatted, bespectacled heads lighting cigarettes in the middle of a broad river.

When approaching bends or obstacles the polemen came to life and worked to slow down the raft. The tips of the poles scraped the river bed, going deeper and deeper until the hawsers took the strain and swished into rigid bars. With increasing strain the poles tilted into the air making the polemen go out hand over hand towards the ends to get the extra weight leverage needed. With both men hung on to the extreme ends of their poles, and with the strain still increasing, they were hauled into mid-air until, unable to hang on any longer, they dropped into the water and swam after the poles to repeat the manœuvre.

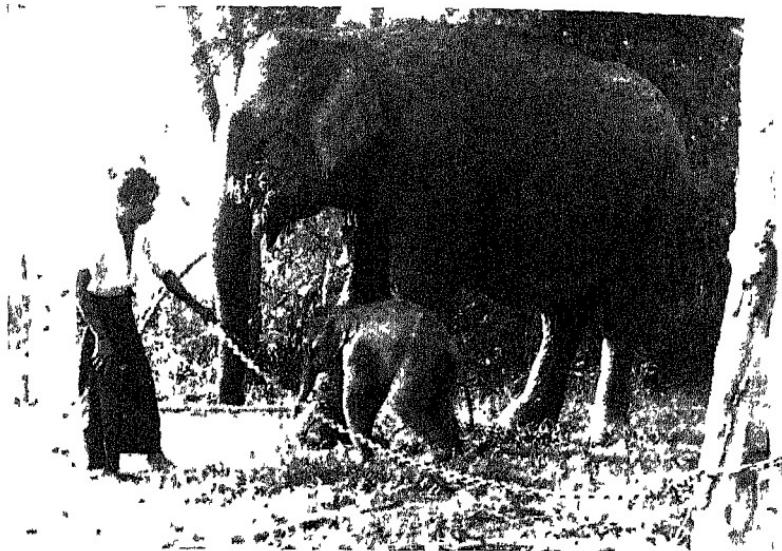
A few such moves usually slowed the three hundred tons raft sufficiently to make it navigable, but woe betide any poleman who tried to put the brakes on too quickly. A pole embedded in the river bed too suddenly threw tremendous strain on the hawser which twanged like a harp string. The pole was whipped out of the river, with the man still hanging on, and he was sent flying for yards in an airborne multiple pinwheel before crashing back into the water with his arms well and truly wrenched.

Two other forms of injury also fell to the rafters' lot. As they were dragged along behind a raft they might be speared by underwater snags, branches of sunken trees and so on, and some terrible injuries were collected in this way. The long hours of immersion promoted a fungus infection of the feet and, as this was treated with the tarry black juice of a jungle fruit, a pair of pitch black feet was almost the official emblem of a raftsman during the working season.

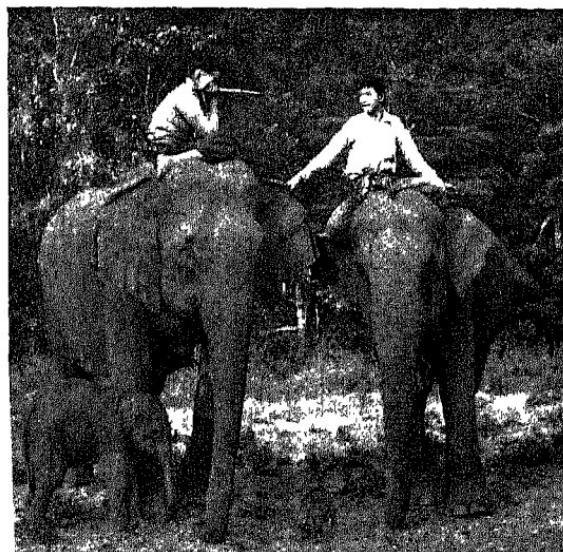
*(Right)*  
Living under canvas



Paying out on the march



(Above)  
Mother and calf  
(two months old)



(Left) Family group  
Mother, "Aunty"  
and calf (four hours  
old)

Though the river water was quite warm throughout the year, indeed much warmer than the tropical rainstorms which beat the river flat from time to time, the heavy exertion and constant immersion chilled men to the bone after four or five hours and substitutes had to take over whilst their shivering companions thawed out. Even those who chewed opium before starting out so as to deaden the chill, and quite a few did, found half a day in the swirling current quite sufficient.

Considering the warmth of the water it may sound surprising that the men got so cold, but it must be borne in mind that they were burning up energy much faster than an ordinary swimmer and also that they were motionless in the stream every time the raft had to be checked and suffering the cooling action of a fast-moving current on their bodies. All in all they had no easy time of it and raftsmen, I feel, deserve a special salute for the skill and nonchalance with which they approach their hazardous work.

The inspection of the "fleet" took a week or so and then I returned to Raheng to find the river contained an armada of anchored rafts all awaiting checking. Many of them were flying the Company flag and our office was besieged by clamouring rafters, who all wanted priority. Our whole staff was turned out to help and I received my baptism in this difficult work.

Checking a raft involved walking over the bobbing timber to list the number and size of each log, after which it was hammered with the raft serial number and a contract drawn up which authorized the raft captain to deliver said timber to the Paknampoh rafting station.

Walking near the stern of a raft, amongst large logs, was almost easy but towards the bows, where the smallest logs were tied to take the shock of collision, one had to keep constantly on the move to stay on top of the water. After a painful fall or two and a backward plunge into the swirling river the lesson sank in and I moved around at speed gripping the rough logs with bare feet; at high speed too when the logs were sizzling under a tropical afternoon sun. Even that was better than falling between logs in the centre of the raft and disappearing beneath the timber.

Periods of monsoon rain followed each other at intervals during September, and after each wet spell the river shot up a foot or two to help our rafts along at better speed. All was going well until October when heavy prolonged rain all over the northern hills pushed the Me Ping River to its highest level

for twelve years and, twice during the month, turbid flood waters surged through our compound to drain away in the low-lying swamp behind.

The rafters, sensing a huge rise, had anchored firmly to islands, large trees and the like, but as the water went relentlessly higher their anchor points were swept away leaving rafts to drift uncontrollably on the flood. The frantic hooting of launch sirens calling for help for rafts in distress was an all too common sound at that period.

Along more than a hundred miles of river the story was the same sad one of inundated villages, some sited ten miles from the normal river bed, and wherever possible our launches were loaned to the provincial governor for his flood relief campaign. They put in some valuable work and during the few hours of each day when their engines were not turning they were tied up to the front gatepost, normally a good ten feet above water level, and floated gently over the main motor highway.

Watery confinement to the house, a dry island in the surrounding wetness, became irksome. Snakes, rats and legions of ants came in increasing numbers to find sanctuary there and made unwelcome guests. One office desk became something like a tenement building, housing a score or so of mice, and when the squeaking became too deafening the office cat, a fierce Siamese tomcat, was shut in the desk with them and thereafter all was quiet.

It was the biggest, though least harmful, snake in the house that gave me the worst fright. Working at my desk one morning I was suddenly aware of a dry rasping, like sandpaper on wood, and looked down to see the last four feet of a fat black snake disappearing under my desk. Black colouring in snakes can denote a very poisonous type, like the Hamadryad, or any one of a number of harmless grass snakes, but I didn't stop to work out the odds. Its head was somewhere near my feet, invisible, but maybe poised to strike! A sitting leap, quite possible under the circumstances, landed me on the table top and calling up assistance. By the time coolies arrived with long poles the snake had wandered through a hole in the base of my desk and was relaxing inside. A cautious pursuit from drawer to drawer enabled us to kill it—an eight-foot-long Ngu Sing, and quite harmless.

With the water lapping the office step small boats were pressed into service for transporting staff to and from their homes and I learnt to navigate one of these cockleshell craft.

One day, feeling somewhat unjustly proud of my new found skill, I decided to paddle the half mile to the Corporation H.Q. and see if the assistant in charge of their Me Taw forest had wallowed his way into station. He had been flood-bound in his forest for ten days and was expected daily.

Once out through the main gate I was in, or rather over, the road. A few yards away the river was racing along with whole trees, broken houses and drowned animals on its crest; it was undermining its banks and adding yet more houses and trees to its burden, but there in the road the water was placid and moving gently upstream in a mile-long backwater.

My trip developed into a procession with a score or more canoes, manned by naked toddlers, darting round my boat like so many swallows as they cheered the amateur efforts of the Nai.

The Corporation building was rather nearer water-level than our own so that a flip of the paddle enabled me to float straight through the front door and up to a desk where the Head Clerk was conducting business as usual, with his feet in a drawer and the files piled up on top of cupboards. These cupboards showed water lines half-way up their battered teak sides and gave evidence of even wetter weather in the past. I stayed long enough to learn that Ingham was sloshing about in his forest somewhere and then paddled home, with an even bigger escort.

When the floods subsided work got back to normal again; rafts moved downriver, rafters newly arrived from upriver besieged the office, and Ingham arrived from his watery fastnesses. Several other teak wallahs also appeared for an anti-theft conference after which we foregathered to enjoy Ingham's lavish bottled hospitality. What started as a convivial chatty afternoon quickly developed into a riot which carried on far into the night as everyone made the most of the rare opportunity for a get-together.

In early November crisp evenings heralded the start of the dry season and the rapidly falling waters made it necessary for us to despatch all our launches on the long return trip to Paknampoh, their home base, to save us the expensive trouble of having a stranded fleet on our hands.

A halt was also called to all raft movements and rafts were double lashed into dry weather anchorages. The rafters, eager now to get on with the work many of them had dallied with during the rains, swore that there would be one more rise to help them through but, rather than risk stranded rafts in the

timber-hungry areas below Raheng, we tied up every stick of timber.

The small rise occurred, as everyone knew it would, and scoured the deep water channel which would later help pole-boat navigation amongst the desert of extensive dry weather sandbars.

This rise, appropriately called the Channel Maker, came at the end of every wet monsoon and changed the course of the river yearly so that rafters had to relearn their route anew every season. Certain men were much respected along the river for their phenomenal, almost uncanny, knowledge of the river and its ways. Consistently, year after year, they floated their rafts into Paknampoh after almost trouble-free passages whilst less gifted rafters were piling up on one snag after another. Such men were the true aristocracy of the river and their services were keenly competed for.

I enjoyed my brief spell at the Raheng rafting station but was pleased to see the rafts tied up and looked forward to a return to forest work—to my mind a much more congenial life.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

WITH THE onset of the cold weather in November I was ordered to start exploration of the vast Me Tun forest area, covering some one thousand square miles, in which felling would start the following year and I welcomed the chance of seeing this huge tract of wild, beautiful country. The trip would take me near the Burma border and into a very sparsely populated region inhabited by the Karen, Leesaw and Mooser hill tribes which had always interested me greatly.

Three elephants, which were getting a little too aged for the arduous work of dragging logs through deep sand on the open sandbars of the Me Ping, were selected as my transport: Poo Tao, a large animal and a willing worker, but too lacking in stamina at the age of fifty-six for prolonged dragging work; Poo Chee, a gigantic animal who had a bad breathing impediment which caused his breath to bubble like steam when he was tired—he was sixty-two and deserved a little pampering; finally Me Mang, an old lady with the small rolling eye of a confirmed bolter and a huge hole in the side of her trunk near the tip. She seemed able to open and close this at will and it never troubled her. No one knew if this were the result of a tiger bite or a defect with which she was born.

My equipment was ferried across the Me Ping in a large dug-out canoe made from a single teak log. This was originally a Company log and had been captured from thieves after completion, but before the launching ceremony. The thieves were real craftsmen and we used this beautifully made boat for many years.

With the arrival of the cold weather, the half-mile-wide monsoon torrent had dwindled to several deep channels separated by big islands of sand and the dug-out zigged and zagged between these for about a mile before reaching the further bank where the saddled elephants were waiting.

I had decided to cross the river barefoot for ease of movement in the boat and had sent boots and stockings across earlier with a coolie who had instructions to wait for me on the far bank. On

arrival I found that the elephants had loaded and gone and the sublime idiot carrying my boots had gone with them. Thinking to catch the elephants quickly I trudged off in bare feet and after about half-a-mile caught up with them, but not with my boots. The unmentionable oaf had gone ahead and after walking a further mile without catching him, I despatched a spare coolie to run and bring my foot-gear back. He hared off and returned in about an hour with boots—but no socks. With a firm resolve that the dumber the animal the kinder I would try to be, I asked him about the socks—"Haven't got them, Master didn't say socks as well." With temper now more inflamed than my swollen feet, I put on the boots, and in awful silence we marched on. Had it been possible I would have camped there and then, but we were in the middle of waterless dry jungle and had to continue about five miles to a possible camp site. A little short of this point my feet were so painful that the boots were removed and hurled at the coolie responsible—they both missed—and the walk finished, as it had started, in bare feet.

The doctoring of several king-sized blisters held us up a day before we could move on again, along a trail which followed an old Japanese military road, which had been built for the invasion of Burma from pro-Axis Siam, but which was never completed. Only a burnt-out Japanese saloon car bore witness to the presence of the Yellow Peril years before, but their road was most useful for about fifteen miles before we turned off it on to an almost non-existent track which followed the Me Taw creek.

Conditions now became much more difficult with high grass and fallen trees blocking the path and whenever the over-growth became too severe to penetrate, the elephants were sent ahead to trample it flat. In this way we made very slow progress gaining height gradually and fording the creek about twenty times a day in the process. Camp was made each evening in hastily cleared patches of vegetation and the resident biting insects—ants, mosquitoes and sandflies, particularly sandflies—made life one long itch until the sun went down. Then the cool night air and a smoke fire kept them at bay.

We travelled steadily but slowly out of deference to the age of the elephants and reached the boundaries of our forest in six days. The water-shed between the Me Taw creek up which we had been travelling and our own Samare Luang stream, down which we were to go, was so flat and gentle as to pass almost

unnoticed. A trickle of water flowing in the same direction as we marched gave the clue that the Me Taw was behind us and that we were within our forest limits.

Exploration could now begin and the first step was to find out where we were. None of our forest areas ever had anything better than sketch maps made of them and these were obtained from the Forest Department in the first place. One then spent an infuriating time with the map marching along non-existent paths, drinking water out of non-existent streams and climbing hills where none existed—according to the map! These maps were nearly always bad, sometimes horrible, and as a result of many days arduous walking they were gradually reconstructed into workable form. Map making in the first place was undoubtedly a difficult task, but some of the errors suggested that the cartographer relied on misguided guesswork in producing his masterpiece.

The map, then, suggested our position as being some miles inside the forest in an area closed to teak working, so it was decided to move on and camp on the edge of the teak sections. We moved down the pleasant upper reaches of the Samare Luang, a small stream at this point little over a yard wide, and surprised some Karen girls prodding under the overhanging banks with scoop nets in search of the delicious fresh water shrimp. They were dressed as in the fashion of Karen maidens in long, shapeless, white Mother Hubbards reaching down to the ankles with two or three red bands encircling each garment. They wore flowers in their pierced ears and white headcloths, with red embroidered edges and dangling red tassels, which covered the hair.

So much was revealed at the first glance. A second glance showed only the shapeless rear view of wildly stampeding girls, deserted nets and a basket of shrimps. We moved on, after making a coolie replace the shrimps he had “borrowed”, with the certain knowledge that our arrival would be proclaimed by excited maidens to the population of some Karen village. After all a *Farang* (foreigner) was a rarity, and I was “news”.

A few miles further on tracks began to converge and we heard the thud of a rice-pounding mallet, cocks crowing and the assorted noises denoting human occupation. To us *they* were “news”, being the only humans who had crossed our path for several days, and with the idea of buying rice, chicken and vegetables we pressed on. We were within sight of the village and passing through heavy vegetation when a large, black,

sway-backed pig raced on to the path in front of me and proceeded at a rate of knots towards the sanctuary of the village. My jungle clerk who was going ahead to ask the villagers about provisions was blocking the path, but in true pig-like fashion the fat sow went through his legs squealing loudly, upended him and bore him along on her back for some yards before depositing him. A very bemused clerk picked himself off the ground, muttering the rough equivalent of "Good gracious". Rustlings in the bushes on either side of the track indicated that her half-grown piglets were also making good speed home.

This outer defence of pigs was a feature of Karen villages, where the animals foraged in the jungle which came right up to the edge of the village. When alarmed they crashed home by the most direct route and went at impressive speed despite the extreme curvature of their spines. Their elongated, vicious heads suggested a definite link with the wild hog—probably through the liaison of some straying, porcine, village belle with an obliging wild boar. Some of them reached a truly gigantic size and the occasional truculent one was not to be taken lightly, though pig-baiting was one of the highlights of Joe's calendar. He respected their enormously strong jaws, but insulted their persons by biting their tails until they bolted, squealing frenziedly.

The village, on a partly-cleared mound overlooking the stream, contained about ten houses and every veranda was lined with curious Karens as we entered. It was almost identical with other Karen villages which I saw over the years and would have been condemned instantly by any sanitary engineer. Amongst Karens the practice of untidiness is raised to the level of an art. Refuse is tossed over the veranda to the ground below where dogs and pigs squabble over it; the houses, with inside cooking fires and no chimneys, are smoke-blackened hovels; and the ground between houses is either a muddy morass churned by buffalo and pig or deep in dust, depending on the season. The people are happy in their squalor though often guilty of excessive body odour through infrequent contact with soap and water. Though rude and very unlettered they have inbred good manners and a native charm which won me thoroughly.

Their clothes, made from a local flax, were spun, dyed and woven into traditional patterns by the women who worked their spinning wheels and hand looms in the shade beneath the houses. The looms, primitive structures with the warp threads

tied to a house post at one end and fastened to the weaver's body by a broad strap at the other, are worked by backward or forward movements of the body which adjust the tension on the threads whilst the west is shot back and forth manually in a bamboo shuttle.

The very durable cloth is usually made into red and blue sarongs for the men, skirts and sleeveless tunics of red and black for the women and white, red-ringed Mother Hubbards for the maidens. Such colouring is general for Me Tun Karens but further north, in the Me Chem, the women wear a gaudy yellow and red chequer-board tunic whilst those in the Me Lee favoured a blue and purple tunic with intricate over-patterns of Job's Tears seed stitched on.

Having observed their colour scheme in passing I asked in Lao for the village headman and was greeted with blank stares. My clerk then tried in Siamese with the same negative response but they started a gurgling, burbling conversation amongst themselves in their musical language. Vowel "u"s and consonant "l"s dominated a speech in which every word seemed to be left unfinished but finally a man was despatched to bring the village headman from his garden. The latter had been appointed to office as the only inhabitant who could speak Siamese and when he eventually appeared we were able to negotiate by mixing and mutilating several dialects. We arranged prices for goods and hire rates for guides who would show us the area, then moved a little way off to clear a camp-site.

The elephants had arrived whilst we were in the village and camp was made in a pleasant bamboo grove on the banks of the infant Samare Luang stream. Even before the elephants had been unsaddled an anxious delegation came along to ask that the animals be kept away from their crops which were being harvested. *Kashaw*—the Karen word for elephant—came up repeatedly and I assured them that we would take every care and, should our animals happen to damage the crop, we would pay generous compensation. The gist of their reply seemed to be, "We can't eat money", and it transpired that even with money in hand they would have had great difficulty in replacing any damaged food in that isolated spot.

In my tent I settled to a puzzling session with the map, trying to place the unmarked village and failing dismally. The arrival of a scouting party from the village ruled out further work. Men, women and children squatted on the edge of my

groundsheet whispering, pointing and nudging each other and my early pose of complete unawareness encouraged the bolder spirits to explore my tent. There, with the utmost politeness, they fingered, prodded and pulled anything that aroused their interest. They were particularly impressed with the weight of my boots (so was I at the end of a long day), at my ejector shotgun where a few empty shells demonstrating the ejector left them speechless, and at my colourful selection of "whodunits" showing technicolour female forms on the paper backs. These were much discussed by the Mother Hubbards, women being sisters under the skin as Kipling had it, but it was the portable wireless which really caused the sensation.

The ritual of cutting bamboo poles and erecting the long wireless aerial had been watched with the keenest interest and before sending them away I felt that their reaction to a Brahms Lullaby, Harry James, Mrs. Dale's Diary, or what have you might be interesting. It was. The first squawk from the "noise box" either paralysed or hypnotized them to such a degree that they sat like mutes through a two-hour programme which included the news, assorted musical items and a fine collection of static effects. They then drifted off into the darkness like people bewitched and the speculations on this new form of magic, once in the safety of their own homes, must have been intense.

Next day we started out with guides to climb the highest hill in sight for a bird's eye view of the working area. There was an awful lot of it but it seemed reasonably easy country, as teak jungle went, except right in the high headwaters of some of the main tributaries. It was a beautifully clear, crisp morning and from the vantage point it was possible to get a good overall picture of the creek, put in patches of hill cultivation on the map, site the two villages along the creek and correct a few of the more glaring errors, thus saving miles of wasted walking later on. My map had been orientated to give a sunrise from due South, a small matter which would have had us navigating in an odd direction if it had gone uncorrected. In the early afternoon, with the sun at its warmest, we started on the return trip to camp.

It was visible not too far distant but several hundred feet below us and I elected to head straight downhill towards it. Our guides were unwilling to go by this route but after they had burbled and gurgled for a while in Karen, producing sounds like water running out of a bath, we were still none the wiser and,

being hungry and tired, I was stubborn about my choice of route. Down we went through grass and matted vegetation until our misguided efforts came to a full stop in the middle of old, overgrown hill cultivation.

The mistake was mine and I should have returned to find an easier route but fallible human nature and a mounting hunger urged me to cut a way through. With thorny creepers and head-high saw grass punishing our skins and clouds of pollen irritating nose and eyes we cut and hacked for a couple of hours, gaining a hundred yards and becoming a hundred times angrier in the process. The mutterings got more sullen the while—everyone was angry with me, including me. However, the breakthrough to the Promised Land in the shape of open jungle quickly restored good spirits and we reached camp—bloody and somewhat bowed with fatigue. There and then I vowed to go round old cultivation in future, in ever-increasing circles if necessary.

In camp I arranged a shave, then lunch-cum-dinner followed by early retirement. The evening audience of Karens arrived with the shaving water and stayed for dinner then departed at my abusive and earnest behest soon after. This "hero worship" stuff soon palled when one was tired. I didn't mind their obvious interest in the lather and safety razor routine since they themselves did the little shaving necessary with razor-sharp jungle knives. Neither did I object to their amusement at my delicate knife, fork and spoon technique which was more refined, though less efficient, than their bare-handed shovelling approach.

I did object, and strongly, to their betel nut chewing. The ground around my tent was taking on the air of a much-fought-over battle-ground with blood red splashes of expectorated juice providing some convincing gore. This, coupled with the reek from bamboo root pipes burning half cured tobacco, proved intolerable and they were requested, forcibly, to leave.

They went quite amicably and doubtless looked forward to a further thrilling instalment next evening. Having decided that a little peace and quiet would help the work along I moved camp next morning to their consternation and settled in newly harvested paddy land inside the beautiful Huay Kating (Wild Bison Creek) to enjoy, so I thought, some splendid isolation.

Whilst the servants were pitching camp I made another foray with the guides to find the boundaries of our teak sections—in fact I found where the timber wasn't, thus preparing the way for a serious start to exploration amongst our stocks

of *Tectona Grandis*—T. Grandis, Esq., as the rich gentleman was sometimes referred to. In properly mapped country this would have been a simple matter of reading a map correctly but in unsurveyed jungles the only real way is to walk the boundaries, via ridgetops, and make one's own working map.

One quickly got accustomed to estimating the points of the compass from the sun with the help of a reasonably accurate watch just as one got accustomed, but more slowly, to the difficult walking. The high stepping walk made necessary by tangled vegetation was much more tiring than the tramp round jungles that were being worked, grazed and trampled by elephants.

Ridge crests, with beaten wild animal trails, always provided the easiest going, but following the rise and fall of a saw-toothed ridge could be an infinitely tedious business. There was however a sense of satisfaction and achievement in reaching the highest point of a ridge, after several false alarms, and seeing broad vistas at one's feet. With the wind singing quietly in one's ears, and endless folds and ridges of jungle green shimmering in the heat far below, few could fail to feel and react to the grandeur and mystery of it all.

At the end of each day's work the wide views were abandoned as we plunged down into the plains making a bee-line, as near as possible, for our camp. Occasionally, at high noon and with the sun directly overhead, only the infallible jungle sense of the Karen guides prevented me from hitting a bee-line directly away from camp though I never lapsed as badly as one of our assistants who marched straight out of one river valley into the next and was faced with a thirty-mile detour back to his camp. Anyone feeling proud of his navigating ability will find the necessary curb to his ego in this form of travelling.

On arrival in camp I was told by the No. 1 boy that there would be a change from the everlasting chicken for lunch as he had been out shooting with my shotgun, without permission of course! This probably explained the two "bangs" I had heard earlier, and I was informed that one paddy bird would be served so assumed that one shot had been a miss.

A bird (I assume it was a bird), was duly brought up and it was fairly evident that he had hit it squarely, with both barrels and at close range. Never have I eaten more beautifully cooked lead shot, before or since, but regrettfully the inedible bird had to be returned to the kitchen with my compliments

and instructions to open a tin of fish. Such culinary failures were common enough in my kitchen to be treated with a certain amount of philosophy.

Directly in front of my tent and some fifty yards distant was a large, square bamboo container—about eight feet high and open-topped. The rice crop had been hand-threshed and the grain was stored in this container until it could be moved to the home village—the one I had still to visit.

In the late afternoon I noticed a line of Karens approaching this storehouse who were obviously full of party spirit. An entire village with all age groups from infancy to senility was heading my way and I realized that I was occupying the front pew at the Harvest Festival—Eastern Animist variety.

The celebration opened with the placing of several bamboo symbols near the storehouse to the accompaniment of incantations, then a bamboo ladder was produced to allow the whole village to ascend on to the heaped rice grain, which filled the container brim-full. The aged were boosted up where necessary, youths gave strenuous assistance to maidens who could have run up backwards, children scrambled up one rung at a time and infants were either thrown up and caught or mounted on shoulders and borne aloft. Altogether an incredible performance but eventually thirty or more people were crammed on to the lofty perch. Then followed some significant act in which the season's grain was handled and commented on, after which bamboo tubes of rice liquor and leaf-wrapped parcels of smoked meat were produced and the festival was in full swing.

After a good harvest it was obvious that the Karens were going to make merry. The songs, shrieks and pipe music got louder by the minute as everyone, down to quite small children, took their fill from the bamboo tubes. They were, in their own fashion, having a royal time with no licensing hours to restrain them and I too enjoyed their good humour, which was probably more tinged with deep thankfulness than most festivals of this kind; to their own type of God naturally. A good crop was the margin between poverty and plenty in their isolated existence.

Just about dusk there was a shout and a wildly waving form toppled off the pile, landing with an audible thud on the ground. Fearing the worst I hastened out to join the crowd round the groaning man and tested the more obvious bones for fractures. All seemed well but he was obviously old, about seventy I thought, and there was a chance that he might have suffered internally. He spoke Siamese and I suggested that he

should go home and rest. This proved the necessary corpse reviver. "Leave the party before it's over! Not likely!" and, after alcoholic stimulant, he was assisted back on to the platform by cheering clansmen. This was my first introduction to the village elder, Pah We Do, who was a charming rogue and one of Nature's gentlemen.

He had, I learnt later, been a contractor with the Company in our Me Tun forest almost fifty years earlier and was approaching middle age even then. His actual age at our first meeting was eighty-two and for Karen, who live hard and suffer heavily from sickness, that was an astronomical age. He had outlived his contemporaries by at least twenty years and was the proud possessor of a young wife, his sixth, and small child, probably his twenty-sixth, possibly his thirty-sixth! Even at that incredible age he was the character of the party and made a striking picture.

Tall and heavily built for a Karen he wore his blue and red sarong, white jacket and cloth turban with an air; his pierced ears each sported a miniature drum of ancient yellow ivory; one twinkling eye seemed to gaze on life with eternal amusement whilst the other dead, blued one, stared blindly off to one side; he had the most heavily tattooed skin I ever saw with weathered patterns of blue, green and red pigment interspersed by moles sprouting inch-long hairs. Altogether he was the life and soul of the party and seemed to have the spirit of eternal youth.

In my later dealings with him I found him to be a chronic hypochondriac, though he had a cast-iron constitution which had survived almost every illness in the calendar and was, no doubt, responsible for his advanced age. He was invariably smoking a blackened bamboo root pipe of foul tobacco and complained of a sore throat so often that I once gave him a tin of good tobacco. In no time he was back complaining that after smoking half the tin, presumably at a sitting, he had found it poor stuff which made his cough unbearable and would I issue him some urgently needed medicine, please. But he never returned the remainder of my "poor stuff".

When he became a contractor under me in later years he went up all but the highest hills with the best of us, protesting vigorously about his age but sending out clouds of rank smoke even on the steepest slopes. At the age of eighty-four he walked to Raheng and back, ninety miles in four days, and at the height of the wet monsoon, to draw money. Truly he was a

grand and indomitable old man who, in his prime, must have been a giant in the land.

But to return to the party; the uproar continued until an hour after dark then the assembly fell down the ladder and wavered homewards across the rice fields in single file by the light of bamboo torches.

This should have ended the excitement for one night but very early in the morning I was awakened by the soft clink of chains slurring over the ground, and got up to find Me Mang walking round the rice store with a proprietary air, like one having found an elephant El Dorado, and preparing to break and enter the treasurehouse. She was cleared away and a sleepy mahout censured for not having attached a clapper to warn of her approach. He protested that he had hung one round her neck that afternoon and next morning was proved correct. She had stuffed it with mud to deaden its warning note.

Serious exploration began in the Huay Kating, a charming creek with a bad reputation. In our previous working thirty years earlier some seventeen men had died of cholera there, during the war when part of the creek was worked by a Government concern a further outbreak of cholera was recorded and, anticipating events, six of our own men were to die there in the next two years from one cause or another.

The pattern of work which was to apply almost daily for several months was soon fixed and proved too exacting for several of the forest clerks who left for more sedentary occupations.

Representative sections, each containing about two hundred girdled trees, were selected in various parts of the creek and these trees were classified for quality and measured; extraction drag routes for the elephants were mapped; the terrain and distances to delivery points were noted; the types and abundance of various elephant fodders, water supplies and future working camp sites, all went down in a dog-eared notebook. By early afternoon everyone had had more than plenty of "jungle bashing", by then the jungle was doing most of the bashing, and we turned for camp which was sometimes indecently far away.

For the clerks the rest of the day was fairly free but I was occupied in translating sweat stained and scarcely legible notes into terms of yield, number of logs, average log size, average dragging distances and, finally, into the number of elephants required to finish the work in the time allowed. On this basis,

and what we considered a fair earning rate per elephant, the maximum price we could afford to pay became obvious, to us at least, and it then rested with us to bargain as far below this figure as a contractor was willing to take.

Shortly before leaving Huay Kating, named after the wild bison to be found in its headwaters, I had one of my several "almost" encounters with a tiger. We had gone to work up the smooth sandy bed of a surface-dry creek. Water emerged at intervals in rocky pools and on our return trip we came across the fresh tracks of a healthy sized tiger in the wet sand bordering one of these pools—so fresh in fact that water was still seeping into the depression left by its toes. Retracing our tracks to camp we could see that the beast had followed our outgoing trail for about half a mile, probably out of curiosity, before branching off on to more rewarding scents. Heavily armed as we were with one walking stick and a few knives, the non-appearance of Stripes worried us less than somewhat. In fact I never did see a tiger during my seven years in the jungle and know of men who have lived a lifetime in the jungle without getting a glimpse of one.

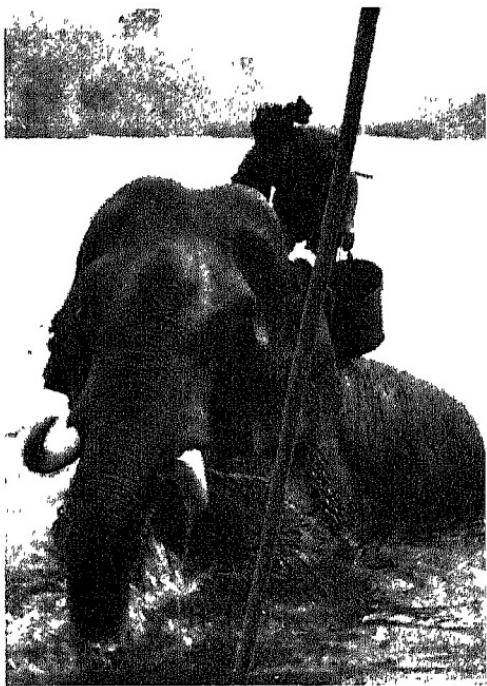
Regarding dangerous wild animals, poisonous snakes and the like which hardly enter the conscious thoughts of Europeans in Europe; one became accustomed either by lack of imagination, gradual acceptance, or reasoning to a fact which was self-evident to jungle people. Namely that jungle animals, in their waking hours, are almost solely concerned with acquiring a day's ration of food—green fodder for the herbivores and flesh for the carnivores—and man does not qualify as a target unless he insists on being a nuisance.

The cats' fangs, bears' claws and snakes' venom are not ordinarily intended for man and are used against him only when an animal is scared or cornered. Almost all the potentially dangerous animals that I saw in the jungle were heading away, often at high speed. Exceptions to the above do exist in such forms as man-eating tigers, outlaw wild cattle, unpredictable bears, hamadryad snakes and a few other types which may attack without provocation. All such are to be avoided like the plague, and of all the bear is rated by many as the most dangerous to man due to the complete uncertainty of its moods.

The black Himalayan bear with its neat white collar stands about five feet on its hind legs and looks a cuddlesome, friendly animal. Sometimes indeed it might be just that, but no one who



(Above)  
Constructing teak rafts



(Right)  
Tusker receiving evening bath



(Courtesy J. R. Martin)

Dragging in dry jungle country, a young tusker in foreground

has seen the holes its three-inch claws can rip in solid teak, or seen a man with only half a face left after a single swipe, would make a friendly overture to Bruin. Knowing all this it must have taken courage out of the ordinary for a Company assistant to separate his two bull terriers from an angry bear with his bare hands, and emerge unscathed at the end of it.

Tigers are much less common in Siam than Burma and India and I believe that only two authenticated cases of man-eating have been established in the last few decades. Both animals were hunted down and killed without delay.

Outlaw cattle annoyed us at a later stage in our Mc Tun forest. These animals had escaped from domestic buffalo herds and taken to the jungle where they soon became as fleet-footed as their wholly wild cousins and twice as dangerous, through having lost their timidity of man whilst in captivity. Mahouts searching for elephants in the early dawn were treed at such regular intervals that they refused to follow up their animals without an armed escort and everyone breathed more freely when the horned hooligans departed for more distant pastures.

The last named menace, the hamadryad or king cobra, is just about the most deadly snake in the world and a big one may reach fourteen feet in length. Its speed is legendary, being faster than a horse over a short distance, and its bite quite fatal in a matter of minutes. Luckily it is uncommon and only one ever crossed my path, during a bout of exploration years later.

On that occasion a forest clerk was walking along the track ahead of me when he let out a howl of pure terror, did an impressive standing side jump and alighted running hard. A small hamadryad had been sunning itself on the side of the path and could be seen moving leisurely away—black on top, yellow at the throat and glistening white underneath it looked not unlike a certain type of grass snake and I received the horse laugh of the year for naming it as such.

Another clerk, a catapult artist of genius, bounced a steel ball off the creature and any doubt as to its breed vanished at once. Up went the head with unbelievable speed, out puffed the hood and the evil object turned to regard us through glittering black eyes only to be flattened by a second direct hit. We were then faced with a very angry snake; with the wide hood swaying in a hypnotic rhythm and the tongue flickering like forked lightning it looked every inch of its deadly repu-

tation and Nimrod was hauled out of range whilst coolies beat it to death with long sticks.

There is a belief amongst jungle people that a hamadryad, unlike other snakes, strikes obliquely upwards and would not be able to hit a man lying on the ground. My coolies were honest enough to admit, however, that if given the chance they would run hard rather than lie down.

One day's inspection was made memorable by my first and only sight of a kating (*Bos Gaurus*) which is elsewhere called the saladeng or gaur. On the well-used game trails of the high ridges we had seen several recent bedding grounds of small herds of kating and on the day in question we were moving up a knife-edged ridge when our progress was sharply interrupted by a tremendous crash in a bamboo thicket ahead. We were just in time to see a full-grown bison leave it in full flight.

These animals, standing a good six feet at the shoulder and weighing almost a ton, are tremendously fast and agile and rate very high amongst the world's big game trophies. Normally inoffensive they can, if wounded or provoked, become fiendishly cunning enemies which tend to circle wide and appear behind the hunter—often to his fatal surprise. Their habitat in the highest and most remote jungle country assures any would-be hunter of a hard stalk which might last for days, as he follows the herd from one grazing ground to another in an effort to get within shooting range of these very wary animals.

The animal that we had disturbed treated the steep ridge side like a patch of smooth lawn, launching itself like a projectile down towards the shelter of the evergreen on the valley floor. Long after our last glimpse of its tapered black-brown rear end we could trace its progress by ear as it tore through offending vegetation.

Further noise behind us proved to be not a circling kating but Joe trying to escape from the embrace of a restraining coolie and take off after his natural enemy—anything bovine. Though of a reasonably good pedigree he had inherited a high percentage of killer instinct from his ancestor, the Old English bulldog, and was a most unsuitable dog to own anywhere outside the wide open spaces. In the latter setting his civilized faults became primitive virtues which rendered my cashbox and personal effects virtually theft-proof so long as he was around my tent.

Almost our last act before leaving Huay Kating to continue exploration elsewhere was to stumble into one of the infernal machines with which Karens protect their crops against marauding wild animals. Round the small patches of cultivation it is usual to erect fences of thorny bamboo which are formidable barriers. The Karens leave gaps promising easy access and any animal using these may find itself impaled on an ingenious spring spear.

This device consists of a heavy bamboo spear, charred at the tip for extra hardness, which runs along a slide pointing across the gap. A creeper stretched across the opening is linked to a trigger which in turn is coupled to a sprung bamboo resting on the base of the spear, and the whole mechanism is released by an animal hitting the trip-cord and, moreover, released with such force that the spear can pass right through the animal.

The whole issue is cleverly concealed and when I headed for such a gap as the obvious route through the fence my irritation at being roughly seized from behind soon changed to gratitude when one of the guides tripped the trigger with a long stick. True, such spears are carefully set to impale the chest of pig or deer and, had I blundered through, the spear would probably have shot behind me, but still the element of doubt and the mental image of myself wriggling like a worm on a hook persisted. Thereafter I destroyed these traps at every chance with almost religious zeal.

Our next camp took us near Pah We Do's village, which differed little in size and squalor from the one further upstream, and it was decided to site our main forest H.Q. in this area. Pah We Do was enlisted and undertook to build the whole encampment for a fixed sum during the hot season ready for our mass arrival at the beginning of the coming rains. Bungalow, kitchen, coolie barracks, godown, stores, blacksmith's shop and sundry buildings extending over several acres were all laid out on the ground for our aged friend. Then, as on many subsequent occasions, I was impressed by the excellent memories of these illiterate people who, lacking other ways of recording information, carry it accurately, and for long periods, in their heads.

After briefing Pah We Do we worked our way downstream in easy stages to the mouth of the Samare Luang creek where it joined the much larger Me Tun River in beautiful surroundings. There the setting sun glowed on high red cliffs

whilst in our camp hundreds of feet below it was already dusk. Giant hornbills winging their way in to roost in the cliff-top trees made a majestic sight against the evening sky. Huge yellow and black barred wings beat out a stately flying rhythm, sounding a "Sh, Sh, Sh, Shirr" of air through the pinions, which sped them homewards at impressive speed. These giant birds are fruit eaters and are good eating, but there is strong aversion to killing them amongst the jungle people due to the belief that if only one is killed the mate will pine and die. During the breeding season this belief has basis in fact as the female hornbill is walled into a hollow tree behind a mud barrier until the eggs are hatched and is dependent for food on the foraging male.

Bamboo rafts were constructed at this camp with the idea of reducing elephant loads and floating some of the heavier kit down-river on the first stage of the return trip to Chiengmai for the annual Christmas meeting of all the teak wallahs. My move next day was jaundiced by a general malaise which developed en route into a typical "go" of malaria. I sat over a roaring fire getting colder and more bad tempered by the minute until a raft hove in sight and I was able to subside amongst the baggage.

After several days enforced halt we moved on with myself reclining in enervated state on a raft. Each raft was manned by two polemen, one fore and one aft, and my two merry men were told that if they tipped me off they might not see me again as I was too tired to swim. They took the lesson to heart and almost achieved my sudden demise by piling up on the first rock in sight. Thereafter some comprehensive cursing from amidships kept the crew on its mettle though it was disconcerting in several of the rapids to have the raft disappear completely, to feel the water caressing the bottom of my deck-chair and see the poleman ahead submerged to the knees in foaming water as he flailed away madly with his steering pole. A steady trickle of water on my head indicated that the helper at the stern was also imitating a demented windmill.

Two days drifting down the scenic Me Tun creek brought us to a point where rafts had to be abandoned at the head of the tremendous Sathorn rapid—half a mile of roaring white water scouring its way amongst house-sized boulders at the base of a sheer limestone cliff.

This rapid has never been navigated; except once, more than thirty years ago, when a Company assistant did the

impossible. The "Nats", water spirits, must have been so confounded by his suicidal recklessness that they forgot to drown him!

After leaving the rafts Poo Chee was rather more than fully loaded by the addition of one weak-kneed assistant who buckled at the thought of walking the last few miles to the Me Ping River where a pole-boat was waiting. I sat behind the mahout, in front of the saddle, and squarely on top of the animal's shoulder blades. A mile or two of such travelling can take the glamour out of riding elephants for several lifetimes. When walking, an elephant achieves a gait whereby both feet on one side are off the ground together for a short interval, the hind leaving the ground just before the fore foot descends, giving a sideways roll. The ponderous tread guarantees a fore and aft lurch, confirmed by the saddle smiting one's back at regular intervals, and the alternate rise and fall of elephantine shoulder blades moving in time with fore legs completed the discomfort. I was balanced on two shifting pinnacles, moving inches apart at a time, and, until the human posterior becomes vastly more elastic than at present, such treatment will continue to provoke howls of anguish.

At Soop Tun my kit was loaded in the waiting boat and, after ordering the elephants back into the jungle for a three week rest, we turned downriver towards the rapids. Our trip this time was a more sedate journey than the mad, shouting rush of some months earlier when we had raced along on the crest of a monsoon-swollen river. Now, at low water, the major rapids were so obviously aggressive that no chances were taken and the boat was lowered down these at the end of a long hawser manned by struggling coolies who were dragged along the boulder-strewn bank behind the captive craft. When things got out of control the Bannar boatmen could be relied on to flash around like otters in the foaming water and establish order from chaos.

It was on the small rapids that one might expect to pile up in the dry season through over-confidence or errors of judgement but only once in my many did this occur when we snagged an underwater rock to win a shattered hull. The boat was beached just before it sank, or vice-versa, and some good work with nails, rags and old petrol tins effected the necessary repairs.

The dry season is a period of activity in the rapids. With side-streams drying up, the game moves down on to the main river to provide good hunting. Legions of fish move upriver to spawn

and whole villages camp on sandbars near their favoured catching sites to operate elaborate fish traps. Many independent fishing parties roam the river using every bait, lure and trap known to man in their efforts to augment food supplies. Dynamite is tossed into deep pools; fish roes, grubs, whole bananas and anything else that can be impaled on a hook is brought into service along with every type of net. The object of the exercise is fish, lots of fish for drying, salting or smoking and sportsmanship isn't in vogue. With no restrictions in force the catches are enormous yet, such is the fecundity of tropical rivers, the fish population seems to thrive on the abuses.

Possibly the most popular gambit of all is the use of poisonous juice extracted from "Lai", a jungle creeper. This is liberated well upriver from the fishing parties to allow wide dispersal, and has the effect of paralysing the fish, which float belly upwards flapping feebly. In pools and the quiet water below rapids, scores and hundreds of glistening white bellies dot the surface to be harvested by swimmers wielding short-handled gaffs, then thrown into waiting boats for removal to the communal dumps ashore.

My boat crew seemed to carry gaffs as standard equipment and didn't hesitate to help themselves when the opportunity offered so that an embarrassingly large pile of fish soon graced the foredeck. This form of piracy came in for acid comment from the resident fishermen and a pithy epithet was freely used to describe my crew. "Seea noan kin" was screeched from all sides like a chorus, meaning "The sleeping tiger eats"—descriptive of anyone who steals the fruits of another's labours.

We drifted below the fishing area pursued by more pungent comments and another week of travelling by boat, bus and train got me to Chiengmai in good time for the Christmas meet—two weeks of revelry amongst the other teak wallahs before starting on a further two months of exploration.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### OBSERVATIONS ON OPIUM

MUCH HAS been written about narcotics, opium and its derivatives in particular; international bodies have been set up to control drug trafficking and the evils of dope addiction generally realized, but still the trade goes on. So long as astronomical profits can be made by a handful of organizers, who finance others to take the risks, there will be no lack of amoral, money-hungry characters willing to take big risks for colossal gain.

The origins of opium as a drug seem to be in the Near East, Persia mainly, whence it was introduced to China by British merchants trading in Hong Kong. Eventually the plant itself was grown in China and cultivation spread westwards through that country to the hill districts of Burma, Siam and Indo-China.

In Siam the growing is almost a monopoly of the Leesaw, Karen, Mooser and Meeow hill tribes who live in the highest and most inaccessible hills of the north. The absence of Siamese on the production lines is a matter of geography rather than superior morals. The latter, living largely on the well-populated plains, could not plant opium without having some impecunious villager turn informer on them. Half the value of any opium captured as a result of such information would be paid to the informer by the Siamese Government which does not countenance opium growing within the country.

Whilst officially frowning on the growing, the Government has been fairly inactive in destroying crops at source, and the ultimate disposal points of some opium consignments captured by the police have from time to time aroused great scepticism amongst the general public and been subject to biting criticism in the press—justified or otherwise I would not presume to judge!

My own close interest in the topic came from an intimate knowledge of the locations of many large opium gardens in and around our forest areas, and I vividly remember introducing the subject to a police constable in a Raheng coffee shop. Moistening his finger in a glass of the local brew he drew a

beery sketch map on the table-top showing the complete layout as I knew it to be. When asked how he knew so much he replied that it was common knowledge. When further asked why the police did not act he smiled cynically, obliterated his sketch, and left me to draw my own conclusions.

The Company's dealings with the jungle people had always been based on timber working and, whilst deplored the evils of drugs, I saw little point in making enemies of potential work-people by giving the police apparently unnecessary information and inviting retaliations in the form of burnt logs or stolen elephants. We pursued our various activities on a policy of mutual tolerance, leaving law enforcement to the body responsible so that, on my many trips through the high opium country, I was always tolerated—even helped on occasion—but never made to feel very welcome.

Possibly the tribes who actually grow the opium deserve more sympathy than any others in the long chain of people concerned with delivering the drug to the smoker's pipe or the addict's hypodermic needle. To them the crop is not a path to colossal wealth, but a means of ensuring their survival in bad years when much of their food has to be purchased and brought from distant places on pony-back.

It is the middleman buying the crop, the opium carrier, the anonymous leader of the smuggling ring and the pedlar of the drugs' by-products who are the real social menace. They are in the game strictly for profits, often astronomical ones, and deserve no one's sympathy. Without their organized supply lines the drug would never start its journey to the world's neurotics and the tribes, I am sure, would only grow enough for their immediate need.

Possibly 25/30 per cent of the opium which passes through Siam on its way to Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong is actually grown in the country. The balance is smuggled across the northern border and originates in the Wah and Shan states of Burma and in Yunnan where growing is on a much bigger scale. The growing is probably identical in all cases and takes place as follows.

During July the poppy heads reserved from the previous season's crop are planted and the foliage, which is rather like that of the common poppy grown in Europe but of a sickly grey-green colour, soon shows. The plants grow two to three feet high and by November buds are showing. By mid December plants are in full flower with white or mauve blooms

predominating, though less commonly one might see pink, deep red, mixed scarlet and white and a few other shades. When the petals begin to fall the opium collecting starts.

Each green seed-head is visited and notched by a special three-bladed knife and the milky fluid which exudes is allowed to harden for a day or so before being scraped away from the head by the collecting knife as a sticky brown paste—the raw opium. Over a period of days each poppy head is revisited and new cuts made, up to a total of four per seed-head, until all the milky juice has been drained off. The total opium product from one head would go on a little fingernail, so that thousands of cuts and limitless painstaking effort are needed to produce one kilogramme—the unit of sale measure.

On one visit to a tribal opium garden, a large one of about a hundred acres being worked communally by the whole village, I met a pleasant Meeow family who obviously saw no wrong in their illegal occupation and were quite willing to answer a curious foreigner's questions on the subject. Father, mother and seven small children, aged four to ten, sat round a midday bowl of rice in a temporary shelter centrally placed in the gardens. Scattered about were the tools of their trade; the cutting knife made of three curved, razor-sharp blades tied together rather like a miniature garden rake; the collecting knife looking like a trowel; hones, opium containers and other items.

Raw opium was produced on request, a brown tacky ball about twice the size of a cricket ball with bits of grass, petals and seeds still embedded in it, and we were told that this mass, weighing perhaps half a kilogramme, was the product of two days' work by the whole family. A further statement that adults made two thousand cuts per day and children half that number indicated that the ball on view had required 22,000 individual cuts or an equivalent of 44,000 cuts per kilogramme, on about 13,000 seed-heads.

The biggest single haul in Siamese history occurred a few years ago when twenty tons of opium from a Yunnanese source were intercepted whilst passing through northern Siam and a few mathematical clicks in the cranium converted this lot into 880 million separate cuts on about 250 million seed-heads. Anyone wishing to reduce the matter to acreages and work-people involved has more patience than I, but it certainly brings to mind limitless gardens and thousands of assorted tribes-people.

When the raw opium is gathered it is "cooked" by boiling in water. This removes extraneous matter as scum and condenses the semi-purified drug into smaller compass for carrying. Raw or "cooked" the opium is always stored in some secret place outside the village and at this stage buyers begin to appear.

These men agree prices and amounts with the villagers, then the exact amount is brought in from the hidden cache. Payment, usually on a strict cash basis, is made and the buyer moves off with the evidence as soon as possible so as to keep the village "clean" in case of a sudden police search.

Double-dealing is almost a basic principle in the opium trade but buyers seldom try to cheat in the hill villages, partly as further trading would be ruled out and partly from fear of the hill men. The Siamese are not lacking in courage, I have seen too many instances of personal bravery to think so, but by instinct and religion they are a kindly peaceful people, who in dealing with people like the Meeow and Leesaw, come up against warrior types with long traditions of fighting and hard living. Exceedingly tough people with swords and crossbows, shooting poisoned arrows to support their opinions, if need be.

The opium which crosses the northern frontiers into Siam provides a source of income to a Chinese Nationalist army cut off in Yunnan, and likewise Burmese opium helps to finance the Karen insurgents in their fight against the Burmese Government. The story behind the transport of this smuggled drug would make fascinating, if somewhat sordid, reading.

A story of connivance, bribery, intimidation, double and double-double crossing, of hardships for many and the amassing of huge wealth by the heavily camouflaged and very anonymous few. Every form of transport and great ingenuity are brought to bear on the quick and secret movement of the drug so that nearly all the big hauls are captured as a result of informers' tips. It is not unknown for a buyer to double-cross himself, making a good profit and a good reputation in the process.

This latter gambit involves buying opium outside Siam, say Yunnan, at much lower prices than the local ones. The minute it crosses the border into Siam its value is greatly increased and the owner then, posing as a virtuous citizen, can give information leading to the capture of his own opium (and his own carriers often!). He then receives half the current value of the haul as provided for by law. In this way he makes smaller

profits, but still good ones; he incurs the minimum of risks and becomes a pillar of society—to all but the cynical majority!

Opium from Yunnan and the Shan states is usually brought down as far as the border, and often further, by Haw tribesmen packing it either on their backs or on mules. The route travelled by carriers inside the country is carefully worked out in advance to avoid centres of population and much frequented trails. A large caravan might have as many as two hundred men, each with some thirty pounds of opium on his back, and the passage of such large numbers through uninhabited country requires careful organization of food supplies, staging depots and guides.

Another assistant and myself were camped in the Samare Luang during June one year when we noticed a lot of police activity in the creek. On asking about this we were told that a trap was being set for a large party of Haw carriers as the result of information given by a Karen who had been hired to guide the party through the Me Tun. To us this looked like the double-double-cross at work as we had seen more than a hundred tough, non-Siamese gents, each with a significant plastic-covered sack on his back, wading up the stream at dawn a few days before. It transpired that this Karen, playing both ends against the middle, had advised the police of the opium party's coming, retarding the date several days, and presumably received a police reward for information supplied. He then told the Haw of an organized police trap which he, and he alone, could guide them through on payment of a reward, naturally. He then, if he was wise, left at speed for distant parts to spend his unearned income.

Manpower moves a large amount of opium but the really big shipments are usually moved in other ways; hidden at the bottom of rice panniers in bullock supply trains, sealed in kerosene tins and stuffed in hollow logs being rafted to Bangkok, under the decks of launches on the main river, under bulk loads on transport lorries, by private car, by railway wagon and by aeroplane to name a few of the more obvious methods.

Police checks are sited at strategic points along the roads and periodic checks made on other forms of transport but the task of checking all persons and goods moving southwards is vast and thorough searching is usually only undertaken as a result of suspicious behaviour or prior information.

Whilst we steered very wide of any contact with opium dealings we sometimes found the consumption of the drug by

our own staff to be a nuisance. There was a definite understanding that anyone caught smoking opium would be dismissed at once. If every known addict had been dismissed on suspicion alone our Me Tun elephant herd would have been largely riderless. This situation arose because of the large number of Karen mahouts we were forced to employ in that isolated creek and the fact that Karenseem to have embraced the drug more enthusiastically than other groups.

They regard opium, which gives a temporary escape from their hard life, as a panacea for all physical and mental ills. Being accustomed to it from a fairly early age they have developed a certain tolerance to its effects though the habit undermined all but the most robust constitutions and it was noticeable that diseases like T.B. and malaria hit addicts far harder than their non-smoking colleagues. Workmen were never able to indulge very heartily at any one time as opium is costly stuff and herein lay the anti-social menace of the more confirmed opium addicts.

Seldom were men under the influence anything but docile, stupid and amenable, but a smoker with his craving half satisfied, and his wages mortgaged to a moncylender for a month or two ahead, would do almost anything to get the necessary extra supply. This led to orgies of petty theft in the working camps and thorough upsets which generally culminated in the dismissal of some of the best mahouts who were replaced by more of the same ilk.

Opium is either chewed or, more generally, smoked in small-bowled pipes. These pipes vary from works of art in ivory, silver, amber and inlaid precious stones at the plutocratic end of the scale down to strictly functional bamboo root ones at the end occupied by our jungle staff. All served equally well for incinerating the prepared pill.

The smoker, or usually a helper, places a small pellet of the brown, putty-like substance on a spoon and toasts it over a lamp-flame until it begins to bubble like boiling pitch. It is then speared on a long pin and popped into the pipe bowl together with a small charcoal ember and the smoker sucks for dear life, partly in an attempt to get the maximum amount of smoke into his lungs and partly to keep the barely combustible pellet alight. The hot smoke produced by such energetic puffing is scarcely palatable so that most pipes have very long stems to aid in cooling. A further refinement is the use of "hubble-bubble" water pipes where the smoker thrusts

mouth and nose into the vertical barrel of the pipe to draw his smoke through a water filter.

Many of our mahouts were not addicts in the true sense, being able to smoke or abstain without suffering much, but they would generally consume as much drug as was available. After a binge their appearance gave them away; wooden, sleepy-eyed, amiable, superbly stupid and colossally indifferent they were easily spotted. In such a mood mahouts were apt to treat even the most dangerous elephants like tame rabbits and they took some hair-raising risks as they capered about their charges.

As a final comment on the subject I would say that, in my opinion, when the Government shows real determination in stamping out the opium racket they can achieve their objective fairly easily. Firstly use local knowledge to locate the gardens then destroy them, with police backing, in November and December of every year until the tribes give up planting the crop in despair. Secondly educate the tribes, who could be good citizens and form a magnificent untapped source of soldier material, to terracing their hillsides and planting commercial crops of coffee, tea and possibly rubber with a guaranteed market for their produce. Thirdly, increase the penalties for smugglers and enforce them no matter what the social status of the men concerned.

These remarks are not made in a mood of carping criticism but arise from a general liking for Siam and the Siamese people. The ideas are not new, having been expressed by many of my Siamese friends who have the welfare of their country at heart. A recognized evil does not become less by being tactfully ignored nor, I hope, will my mention of this sore spot be construed as an act of unfriendliness towards an essentially friendly people.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE SEARCH CONTINUES

AFTER THE Chiengmai interlude, exploration was restarted without delay and I moved off with a mixed transport column of ponies and elephants—surely one of the most exasperating combinations possible and not at all to my liking.

Due to bad saddling Poo Chee was sporting a huge abscess on the top of his back and he was rusticated to evergreen jungle where the mahout could foment the swelling until it was ripe enough to operate on. Poo Chee was replaced by six pack ponies and these, together with Poo Tao and Me Mang formed my ill-assorted transport.

Such was Me Mang's terror of ponies that she might be stampeded by the smell of them. Whether this would occur during the morning bathe, whilst saddling or on the march was never certain but the mad rush into surrounding jungle, with the mahout being thrown or scraped off, was as inevitable as the sunrise.

A few days of her antics reduced her pack saddle to a battered wreck, punished my camp kit and wasted hours of our time in hot, angry pursuit. Her mahout, a rugged Karen, took a strong dislike to ponies after his various unhappy landings and finally laid out a ponyman who had the temerity to laugh at one of his undignified descents from Me Mang's head.

Ponies travel much faster than elephants and it may have been pure coincidence, though the mahouts swore otherwise, that shortly after this incident the ponies passed through a dense patch of elephant grass safely whilst the two elephants arrived to find it a blazing inferno. Whether accident or revenge was never proved but, led by Me Mang, the elephants ran for it, shedding saddles and gear over a wide area. Me Mang's behaviour had ceased to amuse us and she was sent to join Poo Chee with six more pack ponies replacing her.

Despite the alarms and excursions we had made progress back towards the forest area; by a different route and to a different creek. The trail took us over a very high ridge, into

cloud forest, then down through the opium gardens of the hill tribes to our teak areas and ultimately on to the Me Tun creek—so we thought!

The pass through the ridge was reached via a steep ascent of baked clay which became a glutinous mud-slide each wet season, and deep circular elephant footprints from the previous rains had dried to cast-iron hardness, pitting the narrow trail like shell craters. Ponies went down like ninepins on the broken surface and only Poo Tao got through unscathed to the unconcealed joy of his mahout. Chaos reigned supreme though closely challenged by the smouldering tempers and inflammable oaths of the ponymen as they struggled to lift kicking ponies back on to their feet.

I had gone ahead and from a roofed seat at the head of the pass was able to watch the profane and motley collection coming up. Poo Tao was heaving himself up at a snail pace but looked quite unstoppable for all that. At intervals his trunk was thrust into his mouth and sucked up saliva which was sprayed backwards over the body—occasionally the mahout also received a share of carelessly flung digestive juices and registered his protest by rapping the animal sharply on the dome. The ponies were making very heavy weather and I regretted their suffering even whilst sharing the mahouts' joy at the hard lot of the ponymen. (I had my own ideas about the accidental (?) bush fire of some days earlier!)

My roofed vantage point was a building erected by the Leesaw for the use of travellers and commanded a magnificent view over the fertile lowlands along the Me Ping River. It doubtless too provided an excellent look-out for spotting unwelcome opium patrols during the harvesting period. In front of the shack was an immense cairn of stones and before moving on I added yet another pebble to it to mark my passing.

The next few miles were through primeval, evergreen cloud forest; gigantic trees soaring up to interlocked, creeper-hung crowns which allowed only rare glimpses of daylight. The green underwater light and pockets of mist blocking one's path lent enchantment to what otherwise would have been a wet, muddy track veined with networks of twisted surface roots all ready to up-end a careless walker.

The Leesaw, migrants from much higher hills in China or Tibet, seem allergic to getting their feet wet, and all the stream crossings had a planked footbridge. Roofed seats were sited at intervals along the path, and on the approaches to the main

village paths were cut back into the hillside to provide easier going.

Some distance outside the village a travellers' resthouse had been built for the use of visitors—unlike the friendly Siamese the Leesaw do not embrace strangers in their midst. We passed this as unsuitable and soon reached the edge of the village. Here was a much more elaborate bridge which supported a roof and seats over a mountain torrent. Here too were carved posts and symbolic coloured threads blocking the path which hinted at the old and barbaric civilization which had migrated with them.

The village, a large one of some eighty houses, occupied two cleared ridges with a fast, rocky stream running through its centre. The planked shacks were raised on mounds of packed earth with their roof eaves almost scraping the ground. Each had its own water supply which arrived along raised, bamboo channels from a dam higher upstream. Each also supported a teeming population of mixed humans, dogs, pigs, fowls and even the occasional pony in its smoke-blackened interior.

The dogs are big, husky or wolf-type animals with curled feathery tails and aggressive habits. Joe, behaving impeccably for once, was knocked endways by one which then proceeded to chew lumps out of him. Being much the smaller, Joe was content to lie on his back whilst he answered in kind and a royal mêlée ensued with the way of the transgressor getting harder by the minute, until it broke and ran.

The Leesaw people are bigger than the Siamese and, like "yon Cassius", have a lean and hungry look, which is hardly surprising considering that they live on or below starvation level when crops are poor.

The dress of the women is strikingly colourful; a wide, blue Tibetan-style turban surmounts their Mongoloid features; intricately engraved silver bands encircle arms and neck; a belted smock striped in alternating rings of red, blue, white and black material overlaps a plain skirt and black or scarlet leggings encase the lower limbs from knee to ankle. Altogether a more radiant display when clean, which it seldom is, than the men's all black garments relieved only by patterns of silver studs on the jacket and necklaces of silver baubles.

I tried to purchase some of their ornaments but all that were offered were of crude workmanship and had not been worn. The various ornaments, supplemented by tattooing on the men, act as charms against a variety of misfortunes, taking on

the personality of the wearer, and their sale would only be considered in absolute extremes of poverty. A necklace of silver coins, amongst which was an old Burmese one bearing the head of Queen Victoria, excited my interest but offers of many times its sterling content were met with magnificent disdain.

The staple food of the Leesaw is maize which is harvested in October and their economic safeguard, opium, is collected in December and January. The *hais* (gardens), often many acres in extent, are sited along the faces of steep hillsides. To establish them the high evergreen is felled some years in advance and allowed to dry out so that shortly, before planting, the tangle of fallen trees can be burnt, giving very rich potash deposits. Gardens are cropped to near exhaustion before the tribe moves on and the difference between the excellent crops of the first few years and the sickly, stunted yields thereafter show how much fertility the soil is losing by run-off during the wet monsoon.

Their nomadic policy of "shifting cultivation" makes it necessary for each tribe to occupy large tracts of country to allow periodic movements of villages and crops to less tired land. These migrations help in slowing down soil loss but do nothing to improve matters actively and the loss is a national one. Many important side-streams, which once had heavily forested headwaters, now bear only poor scrub. Where formerly they had a steady and permanent flow they now roar with short floods and go dry in the hot weather. Such devastation, if not halted, could result in time in catastrophic flooding along the main rivers, but the problem would seem to be solvable, not by moving the hill tribes around like poor relations every so often, but by teaching them to retain fertility by irrigation and terraced hillsides. Any attempt to resettle hill people on the plains would be doomed from the start.

The Leesaw, and hill people generally, are slimly built but with tremendously muscled legs, and their feats of endurance in difficult country, often with a heavy back load suspended from a head strap, put them in the Sherpa class. Hills are not just lightly treated, they are ignored. The shamble down one slope with a bumping load followed by the tramp up the opposite slope never seems to halt the constant talking, smoking and chewing. Most of the heavy carrying is done by the women and I could have competed against them on even terms but no amount of training would have fitted me to challenge the men on the hills. Wild as hawks, dirty, often diseased; they

were superbly capable at ironing out slopes under their calloused feet.

Our arrival in the village had been treated with great suspicion and there was probably some idea that we were out to sabotage their opium, which was being harvested at that time. The reception improved when they realized that our interests lay more than a thousand feet below in the teak forest and they supplied directions on how to get there.

Obviously they had misunderstood us as their route involved crossing several watersheds then making a wide swing back—twenty miles to cover a crow-line of seven. So next day we struck off on our own line, straight down the stream, making good time to within a mile of our destination. Here the path went through a rocky defile then ended at the top of a sheer cliff. A bamboo ladder made an easy descent for men to where the path ran on as easily as before but the ponies were completely stymied as a day's search showed.

Vowing not to challenge the locals' knowledge of their own backyard again, until the next time, we retraced our steps to follow the Leesaw route. On the way I saw my first poison tree.

Almost all the tribes use crossbows firing flighted bamboo darts, and when after big game their arrows, very small slivers of wood, are tipped with poison which is obtained from the sap of the Upas or Antiar tree. The soft bark of the tree was like a pin-cushion holding scores of embedded arrows. These were left until the milky sap soaked into the arrow tips, then removed. On contact with air the sap, not unlike the latex of the related rubber tree, dries a dark brown and the tips are carefully sheathed in protective leaves. Such arrows can kill a man in about twenty minutes, deer and pig in half an hour and one shot, well placed, can bowl over an elephant in several hours. Considering the great skill the people have with crossbows one had to rate the rather toy-like equipment as highly effective.

Our return route led us through Ban Pah Ja Der, named after the village elder, which presented a complete contrast to Ban Leesaw. This was a Karen hill village, also sited on a cleared ridge, but at a much lower elevation. Here bamboo grew profusely and the raised houses were built of this multi-purpose grass. Elephant saddles slung under some of the houses indicated that the people, besides growing opium and hill rice, retained a link with timber working.

Pah Ja Der confirmed that we were on the correct path and improved the shining hour by asking for a working contract when we started felling. At a later date he got one but many times did I curse the day I met this emaciated, charming and completely inefficient character. When his presence at work was most vital he could be relied upon to be harvesting his opium, or smoking it, or buying an elephant with his men's wages. Then he would be reported dying, then dead, after which he would appear like a Death's Head asking for yet more money.

It has been my experience with hill people that they will answer questions as well as they are able, but will seldom volunteer information and no one had thought it worthwhile telling us that we could get to Soop Nam Warn (Mouth of Sweetwater Creek)—our destination—but no further towards the Me Tun, as the jungle was trackless.

We did, after some clearing and assisting of ponies down slopes, get to Soop Nam Warn—a very wild spot where two mountain streams rush out of the hills. A bungalow site was laid out on the only piece of flat ground and exploration continued apace.

Only when ready to move on did we find that the ten miles to the main Me Tun creek were trackless and the thought of cutting a path daunted everyone. Poo Tao, unloaded, could have smashed a path through in time but we decided to circle again.

This time we would go up the main Huay Ngua (Bullock Creek) over the hills and back on to the Me Ping River at Bannar. Travelling up the Huay Ngua then branching up a small side-stream Huay Kipper (no reference to smoked fish, but the Mud Creek) we passed one of the two Mooser villages. The people here were a sorry lot living in animal squalor and obviously very poor relations of the Leesaw and Karen. They wore little in the way of distinctive tribal dress beyond a few silver studded jackets.

Here again the villagers thought that their opium was our aim and were only too pleased to supply guides who would show us out of their district. We were taken by a roundabout way which by-passed their gardens and led up some soaring ridges to the watershed.

The guides pointed vaguely in the direction of Bannar then returned home leaving us to sort out the way. On our descent we passed through a short, wet patch of country which was

swarming with leeches. One expects such beasts in the rains but at the height of the dry weather they come as a surprise, and we were kept busy burning off the blood-suckers with lighted cigarettes until clear of the spot. A Mooser family returning to their village had the proper idea. They each carried a stick with a small cloth sack tied on the end containing wet salt and crushed tobacco. Quick dabs of this strong solution shrivelled leeches off their skins at speed.

Once in the lowlands there was a long slog into Bannar through parched scrub and cactus to reach the deserted old Company house where we halted a day or two to repair pony saddles.

The house, a forty-year-old replica of the Raheng one, was situated in the suburb of Bannar misappropriately called Tar Pi Man (Paradise Landing), and had seen some stirring times in its earlier years when it was an overnight stop for passengers going to and from Chiengmai by boat.

At that time there was no road or rail link with Chiengmai and the Company maintained a large fleet of riverboats which carried trade goods to the capital of the north. Many foreigners, particularly teak wallahs, depended on these riverboats for access to the isolated northern provinces and consigned themselves to a tedious upriver voyage of five hundred miles which might last six weeks or more depending on river levels.

Money in the form of silver rupees was sent up to the forest headquarters about once a year usually in the care of a Company man returning from leave. The story of the new assistant going upcountry for the first time, who was seated on boxes of specie and handed nothing but a Siamese grammar to read, and who stepped off the boat in Chiengmai speaking fluent Siamese, doubtless has some basis in fact.<sup>1</sup>

In its early days the Bannar house was also the forest headquarters for the Me Tun area and even then Pah We Do was making his presence felt. On one visit to the assistant living there he was offered a snort of gin and managed to polish off the whole bottle, neat, whilst talking over some business. Probably he was saying even then that it was rough stuff which made his throat sore!

After repairing equipment we moved off north to Huay Luang (Big Creek) and a couple of days later saw us well inside this large side-creek ready to resume exploration. Here the trip almost came to an inglorious and fiery end before it was properly started.

Each dry season from January onwards the litter on the jungle floor ignites spontaneously and creeping ground fires clear away old matted vegetation, making way for the new season's growth. Some of these fires reach considerable size and provide one of the most impressive of jungle sights when viewed from a distance on a dark night. Long, jagged fronts of flame advance across the black back-drop of hillsides, exploding into pyrotechnics as clumps of dry bamboo are engulfed by the everchanging scarlet patterns of destruction which drive all living creatures out of the vicinity.

My tent site in Huay Luang was on the edge of a sea of dried-out grass and the supreme fuel value of this was emphasized by smoke from a jungle fire just over a low hill. The head ponyman said, "It's only a small fire and will not come near here," but he took the precaution of driving in the ponies and picketing them in the dry stream bed.

The first sight of the fire as it came over the shoulder of the hill brought everyone up with a jerk. Obviously a real holocaust was heading straight for our encampment. So much for prophetic ponyman, thought I!

The next half hour, except for the serious threat to the camp, was one of the most ludicrous farces ever enacted in the name of fire-fighting. Everyone worked with a will, but each with a different objective, and each man shouted orders so loudly that no conflicting orders could penetrate his hearing. The result was chaos and near hysteria. Water was thrown on canvases, then, when the bore-hole went dry, some half-mad coolie heaped on wet sand until the tent-poles creaked. The fire-fighters some two hundred yards out in the grass had tried a frontal assault, getting a scorching for their efforts, then moved round to the flanks where they spent more time doing an energetic, barefoot dance on hot embers than in beating (not that I blamed them).

The fire looked a certain winner and the men were hauled out to start backfiring. This was a new gambit to them and, time being of the essence, they received about ten seconds' tuition each, consisting of abrupt orders to start a line of fire between the camp and the main blaze, then put it out after a strip had been burnt bare. They thought me a little queer in wanting a second fire when the first one was more than they could handle but were determined to help; one bunch got a conflagration going that rivalled the main blaze then couldn't control it, another party lit fires which were

beaten out by a third group before getting fully alight, and some sublime oaf started an independent fire near camp which almost incinerated half a dozen coolies who retired, angry and smouldering, to throw wet sand over themselves in the creek.

The camp was being deluged with soot and ashes then the ponies bolted. Just when I was calculating the finances of this grim joke we found that the backfires had united in front of the main blaze which fizzled for lack of fuel. A further, fairly concerted effort on the secondary fire restored smoke-blackened order round the camp and left the main fire to eat its way along further up the slope. Though short-lived in any one place, jungle fires are intensely hot and there were plenty of scorches needing medical attention.

Some weeks were spent in Huay Luang before we were ready to move on to the rugged hills bordering the Me Ping rapids. Along the way out we came across the tracks of a large tiger and grooves showing where a heavy body had been dragged through the scrub. Curious to know the score we followed these up for a quarter of a mile, coming eventually to the half-eaten carcass of a village buffalo.

This had obviously been killed near the path and dragged to a secluded spot for consumption and it suggests the tremendous power of a tiger, weighing perhaps five hundred pounds, which had enabled it to move an animal almost four times its own weight in this way. The kill lay in open scrub and my ambition to see a tiger, possibly kill one, was not strong enough to support a ground-level encounter when next it moved in to feed.

We kept moving and established our next camp in the rapids. Here elephant and pony transport was impossible and was replaced by riverboats. The scenery was marvellous, amongst the wildest and most colourful that Siam has to offer, but to us it was less scenery than one damn great hill after another, until we got corns on the sides of our feet through walking across slopes.

One morning, standing as usual on a slope, we heard wild crashings in a brake of dead bamboo higher up the opposite slope of the stream under survey, and had a grandstand view of wild pig on the move. The thirty or so red-brown, agile beasts showed a complete contempt for obstacles and crashed through the undergrowth at a rate of knots to vanish in the valley below us. The wild pig with its long vicious head and body tapering to lean flanks has about the same resem-

blance to a tame hog as a heavyweight boxing champion has to a tired business man, and is a very tough animal indeed.

After finishing this long strip of country time was short and a return was made to Raheng, to prepare for the new working season, leaving the balance of the exploration for the next hot weather.

## CHAPTER TEN

### DISTANT JUNGLES

THE NEWS had quickly gone round on the bush telegraph that the Me Tun forest was being opened up and potential contractors besieged the office asking for work. They were sent off to inspect areas then return and name their lowest tender.

During April and May they trickled back to go through the time-honoured procedure. First we were told how incredibly difficult the job was, how no one could do the work at a profit but, since they were old friends of the Company, they would do the work for Ticals x per cubic metre. This was a sum at least twice our maximum and etiquette required that we laugh hysterically at the idea. Long practice had put us in the top flight of this odd profession. We then named a sum less than half that we were willing to pay and the contractors' laughter rolled round the office. Honours then being even we could settle to serious discussion and usually arrive at a happy compromise, though occasionally pressure was brought to bear and we had to pay through the nose.

Certain parts of the Me Tun were divided into spheres of influence, each with its own "gauleiter", and these men were determined to cut themselves a good slice of Company cake in their own areas. There were veiled threats, couched in pleasant ambiguous terms, that unless such men received some preference accidents might happen to our timber and elephants. It was tacitly understood of course that the contriver of possible accidents was speaking to us from across the table, but ever being able to prove this point after the event was a very different colour of horse.

When the felling contracts were tied up I set about ordering enough stores to see our Company elephant camps through the working season as my last task before going out myself to the jungle. The chore was complicated by the remote, almost uninhabited nature of the teak areas, so that nearly everything except water had to be packed in over forty-five miles of jungle track by pony and elephant transport, and packed before the rains closed the route to ponies.

The list grew until my head reeled; dragging chains, tying chains, hobbles, axes and saws by the score; jungle knives by the hundreds, pick-axes, mattocks, crowbars, an anvil weighing two hundred pounds, a collapsible forge, grindstones, files, wire ropes, bar iron, cooking pots and a host of other items to supply working needs; fifty tons of rice, cases of tinned fish, coffee, condensed milk, and prawn sauce; Beauty Girl face powder (this one raised the manager's eyebrows!); dried fish, a hundred gallons of cooking oil and a like amount of kerosene, sacks of sugar and so on down to ink, writing paper and needles.

Then came my own stores; cases of canned goods and a hundred or so live chickens being but two of the items. Next the medicine for the workmen was ordered; penicillin and a host of sulpha drugs for infections, concentrated vitamins for beri-beri, quinine derivatives for malaria, and the invaluable aspirin pills were all ordered by the thousand with disinfectant and bandages by the gallon and yard completing the medical stores.

After this the elephants were catered for; enough compound arsenic strychnine tonic pills were ordered to poison the population of a small town and sufficient purgatives to evacuate it. A medley of ointments for wound treatment were acquired, as were castor oil and borax for eye troubles. Corrosive sublimate for cauterizing tiger wounds and phosphoric acid paste for elephant branding were carefully packed against leakage, as anyone eating food contaminated with them would be booked for a highly painful death. Finally a titbit for the elephants in the form of half a ton of salt and the same amount of tamarind fruit just about closed the order sheet and I was free to leave Raheng for a three month stint in the jungle.

At that time, the end of May, our elephants were still on a two weeks' march from distant rest camps, so some fifty transport ponies were hired, half of them to move myself and retainers and the other half to make a start on the mountain of equipment piling up in Raheng office, which began to look like a warehouse. Pony saddles were loaded at the office then boated across the Me Ping whilst the ponies were swum across, with their owners hung on to any convenient tail, for loading on the far bank.

We made a very ragged start in our first morning out and had not yet lost sight of Raheng town when we came upon a very agitated party of bullockmen. They had picketed their

animals on a scrub-clad mound the previous evening ready to move into Raheng early next day and had suffered a rude awakening just before dawn when a tiger arrived, killed a bullock and carried it away before the men got untangled from their blankets. The other bullocks had broken their picket lines in a frenzy of terror and taken off for distant parts and a party of reluctant warriors were loading ancient rifles with shaky hands whilst trying to talk sufficient courage into themselves for a pursuit of the tiger. The more timid were in favour of rounding up the still live bulls but were out-voted and eventually a hesitant, hair-triggered group moved off on the big cat's trail. We wished them "Good Hunting" and moved on.

Our ponies, having winded the tiger, proved a restless handful throughout the day and a group of ten broke their moorings at our first camp to spend the night dodging about the jungle. Next morning they evaded the ponymen until midday and, once again, I felt the helpless rage at the classic foul-up which seemed to be the standard start to a jungle tour.

Three days later we arrived at the jungle H.Q. to find our building erected but roofless. Pah We Do and his merry men were still scouring the jungle for thatching material but with a little spurring they completed roofing before the first rains. Everything was as planned except the raised floor of my bungalow, which quaked like a jelly at the slightest movement. A few days in which books slid off shelves and tea sloshed out of cups was enough, so the innards were torn out of the house and rebuilt on terra firma.

The elephant herd was signalled as a few days' march away and the period of waiting was occupied in checking stores and giving further orders to the returning pony train.

One evening the cheering sound of massed elephant bells was heard from downstream and everyone turned out to welcome the new arrivals. The elephants, sensing the end of their long march, indulged in prodigious rumblings as they were unloaded and all hands worked with a will to get camp pitched before dark. From the constant swinging of trunks and tails, the shuffling feet and the fat, quilted hides one could see that these animals had rested well and were in prime condition despite their hundred miles journey. Next day all animals were inspected and their log books entered up for the start of another working season.

Headmen were allocated felling areas and moved off to

find their girdled teak trees and build camps. Within a week they were back to announce their camps completed and ask for "lieng pee", spirit money, to put the more potent spirits in a good mood for a successful season's work. The celebrations and hangovers lasted another week then the topic of work was introduced. Both men and elephants, fresh from several months of glorious idleness, were disinclined to consider such a distasteful subject and the yearly bitter struggle started anew.

Elephants showed their antipathy by not allowing the mahout to unhobble them in the forest and thus delaying the ride into camp or by refusing to sit for the morning bath which preceded saddling. After their long rest backs and chests were tender so they started on light work to prevent abscesses, but even this gentle beginning aroused some stubbornness. The men, full of wine and insolence, were also going slow, but gradually the inertia fell away and the thunder of falling trees assured me that things were going ahead.

With our own camps in action I made a quick trip to inspect the two hundred contractors' elephants, Pah We Do's being a few of them, then back to the Company camps which were demanding a lot of attention. The contractors were hard at work, all except Pah We Do whose elephants were always "arriving tomorrow" or "left yesterday to bring rice". So far as I knew they might have been a mythical herd of hairy mammoths for all the work they were doing.

Logging instruction and frequent inspections of progress and elephants provided a very full schedule in the Company areas and as a result several lazy mahouts were sacked before they could do too much damage. Such men often tied their animals overnight to clumps of bamboo or to a felled tree bearing edible creeper. In this way the elephant got a restricted diet but the mahout was able to appear efficient by being ready for work early each day. His animals' loss of condition always exposed the deception.

By contrast the care lavished on an animal by a good mahout was a joy to see. Such a man would ride his animal to good grazing after work then turn it loose and be away before dawn the next day, lighting his way through the dark jungle with a bamboo flare, to the point where he had last seen his charge. The groove left in the ground by the trailing tying chain was then followed up until the sound of the elephant's clapper revealed its position.

In areas carrying a large number of elephants it required a

high degree of skill to distinguish the chain marks of his own beast from a maze of intersecting lines. True, his knowledge of the animal's grazing habits, footprints and dung were a help but I often marvelled that some animals, particularly the wanderers, were ever caught at all.

The long-distance grazers were well known and mahouts were hard to find for them. Animals like Poo Ek Kam Sein, The Single-Tusked Golden Warrior; Poo Sing Tong, The Golden Horned; Poo Souparp, The Polite One; and Me Bong, Mrs. Borer; all considered that the grass was greenest on the other side of the hill and went there to find it. At times they could be seen coming into camp for saddling when other elephants were finishing work for the day.

The fierce animals were also well known but there was no trouble in finding riders for them. Fierce elephant mahouts earned a lot of prestige and more pay for their dangerous work. These animals were divided into those dangerous to men and those dangerous to other elephants.

The former type included animals like Poo Boon Chu, The Honourable One; Poo Tem, the Patchy One; Poo Kam, The Golden One; and the notorious Poo Bua Noi, The Small Lotus. The morning search for these beasts was always conducted by two men—one spearman guarding whilst the mahout knelt in a precarious position between the forelegs to unhook the hobbles.

The latter type included fine animals like Poo Ek Sri Wong, Sri Wong the single tusked; Poo Tong Bow, The Golden Watermaker; and Pah See Suay, The Beautifully Coloured One. These were turned loose to graze as far away as possible, but sometimes worked back towards each other during the night, then the angry trumpeting as the two tuskers hurled challenges at one another turned out the camp with spears and torches for a race through the jungle to get between two possible combatants.

Female elephants were generally docile, sometimes peevish maybe, but that very rare bird the savage female was a holy terror. Trading on the gentle name of her sisters, and looking like them, she could approach strangers without alarming them until in a position to do maximum damage. I only ever knew one such animal during seven years in the jungle when I saw thousands of assorted elephants, and she was accorded a flattering measure of respect.

We insisted that she be given a bell like the tuskers but soon

found that other Karens, unwilling to observe the convention of wooden clapper for females and metal bell for tuskers, were hanging a variety of clanging bells on their own females. In areas containing hundreds of elephants one had not the time to remember more than a few dozen animals and, in our efforts to play safe, we must have detoured round quite a number of clanging but otherwise harmless old ladies.

The early work of the season had been carried on in interminable drizzle but in July, after some sullen days with the clouds scraping the tree-tops, the real monsoon deluge descended. The Samare Luang creek, normally placid and meandering, reacted suddenly to the downpour and went up inches per minute until the torrent, rumbling like a train in a tunnel, started collapsing banks and carrying away trees. Within a few hours, and just as suddenly, the rise was over until the next monsoon storm and the clerks in their riverbank shack breathed more easily and went for a bathe.

Amongst the party was my personal clerk, an able but dandified young man who was keen on fisticuffs—the theory of the sport at least. He could regularly be seen studying gory-fronted boxing magazines and practising stances. His bathing sessions were usually combined with murderous bouts of shadow boxing in which his mythical opponent was laid low with dubious elbow punches, jabs to the kidneys and kicks to the head after the Siamese style of boxing.

I got lots of amusement from watching his teeth-grinding acrobatics and a real laugh from the climax which came one evening when he went berserk and launched a two-fisted attack on the sheer side of a sandbank. In what might be classed as "agony" the bank gave up the fight and collapsed on the top of the warlike clerk, half burying him and stunning him more than somewhat. He was excavated by his laughing companions and consoled on suffering the first knock-out of his fighting career.

One afternoon shortly after this spot of comic relief I was on my camp-bed gazing vacantly at the rafters and turning over working plans in my mind. My unfocused eyes told me that the rafter over my head was moving but a closer look at this odd phenomenon revealed a long snake rippling along the top of the beam, and raising its head occasionally to look down into the room. No doubt its object was to move from A to B with a minimum of fuss but one slip would have dumped it in my lap.

I left that bed like a rocket and called for reinforcements which arrived at the double. The snake had vanished but a thorough search found it coiled like a spring under the bathroom floor. This was ripped up and a few rounds from my automatic, slicing holes through the body without hitting any vital parts, irritated the snake considerably. It emerged and chased us round the garden for a short while until clubbed to death by the cook.

Under the floorboards we found a glittering nest lined with dozens of silver-paper chocolate wrappers and, as only a few were eaten each evening, the nightly collection must have been going on some weeks. The snake proved to be an eight-foot long banana leaf viper, beautifully marked in black and yellow, which was poisonous though not often fatal. Even so my toes curled for days afterwards every time I entered the bathroom at the thought of how close my bare feet must have been to the nest on numerous occasions.

Days passed quickly in the rush of work but scarcely one went by without Pah We Do coming along to ask for something. It might be a few Ticals cash for his men; a few pills for his villagers—their faith in my ability to cure the incurable was touching; a fill of tobacco or just a chat. To be sure he was a character, a great help in handling the local Karens, and a mine of information on jungle lore, but I was too busy to enjoy his frequent interruptions. One day he was told that he could have money, lots of it, but would have to go to Raheng for it. The route through the Me Taw was a nest of thieves at that time and the Karens were most unwilling to make the trip.

However, a party of six men under Pah We Do's leadership eventually set out and reached Raheng in two days—a remarkable feat of travelling by the octogenarian Pah We Do. I expect that at eighty-four years of age forty-five miles will take me two weeks! They had made haste so as to draw the money and be well on the return journey before news of their cash-carrying jaunt leaked out, but the bush telegraph had carried word ahead, so that on their first night out from Raheng they were awakened at gun-point by a group of masked men who carried off a small fortune in notes and some much treasured rifles.

A shaken party of Karens hurried back to tell me of the affair, completing ninety miles in four days, and to ask for help. My admiration of the indestructible old man's walking prowess was exceeded only by my desire to see the thieves

caught, and I was determined to take some action. Despite the masks worn by the thieves the Karen were sure that they knew some of the men involved, just as I was sure, in an un-provable fashion, of the identity of the man behind the theft. But in their fear of retaliations and mistrust of Law Courts all the Karen closed up like clams when asked to supply details to the police, so little could be done beyond reporting the incident.

Years later, however, I had the pleasure of doing the arch-thug out of a very juicy contract which he considered was in his pocket. It was given to an even bigger rogue to guard against attempted sabotage—a form of power politics which allowed thieves to fall out and honest men to come into their own.

Next, after a period of quiet industry, it was the turn of the rice clerk to dump his troubles in my lap. He came along to say, "The blacksmith is smoking heavily and causing trouble. He is demanding money and stealing things to pay for his opium."

"Prove he's smoking and I'll act," was the reply.

As I was preparing to go to bed some evenings later an excited rice clerk came out of the darkness to say, "He's smoking it now."

A cautious approach was made to the man's bamboo "basha". Gleams of lamplight came through cracks in the walls and an eye placed to a convenient hole revealed a scene worthy of Dante's *Inferno*.

The blacksmith, seated cross-legged on the floor, was puffing like an asthmatic bellows at his long pipe whilst his wife, crouched over a flickering yellow lamp-flame, looked like the twin sister of one of the witches in *Macbeth*. She was toasting small pellets of opium over the flame and as each began to bubble it was dexterously speared and placed in the waiting pipe.

Having seen sufficient I beat on the closed door with a melodramatic "Open in the Name of the Law"—a phrase I had fancied using since childhood! The words may have signified little but the tone roused the occupants and noises of hurried concealment were followed by the woman opening the door.

"Good evening, sir. My husband is ill in bed, is there anything I can do?" The sweet, heavy fumes hanging round the shack told their own story but were politely ignored.

"Why, yes! You can nurse him devotedly all night because he'll be leaving in the morning, sick or well," and we departed for bed.

Next day, having seen the blacksmith off, I moved to the bungalow at Huay Pladook (Mudfish Creek), to be free from pin-pricks for a while. The track, following the main elephant trunk (pardon the pun) route, went for part of its length through the worst mud I have ever encountered. The passages of hundreds of elephants treading more or less in the same tracks had made a necklace of yard-deep, slime-filled holes. With every step an elephant's foot plunged into a waiting hole like a giant piston into a cylinder squirting liquid mud as high as the saddles. Our own progress was made by treading gingerly round the rims of the craters but, inevitably, there were many descents into the sticky depths. Early falls were heralded by ironic cheers but soon everyone was plastered with mud and the joke lost its savour so that energy was conserved for the tiring business of getting ahead. Additional joys in such mud-baths were leeches and mudsores but these could be suitably dealt with when camp was made.

At Huay Pladook, in the centre of contractors' operations, the passage of elephant trains taking rice into working camps; our own bullock trains struggling up the hills to supply Kay, my assistant, with rice and stores in Huay Ngua; the rumble of logs being dragged down the rocky creek-bed, and noises of working elephants in goodly numbers made an animated and bustling setting for my bungalow. This edifice, a jerry-built affair on stilts, started falling down even before completion and collapsed for good in mid-season.

Whilst here I found myself in need of more coolies in a hurry and a party of five passing through the forest were quickly hired despite their hard-boiled appearance. One day these men were left to work in camp whilst I went out on the usual inspection tour and on returning I sensed an air of uneasiness about the place which was not usual. A hot bath improved my frame of mind but whilst changing in the bedroom I felt that something familiar and valued was missing. "Valued", that was the operative word!

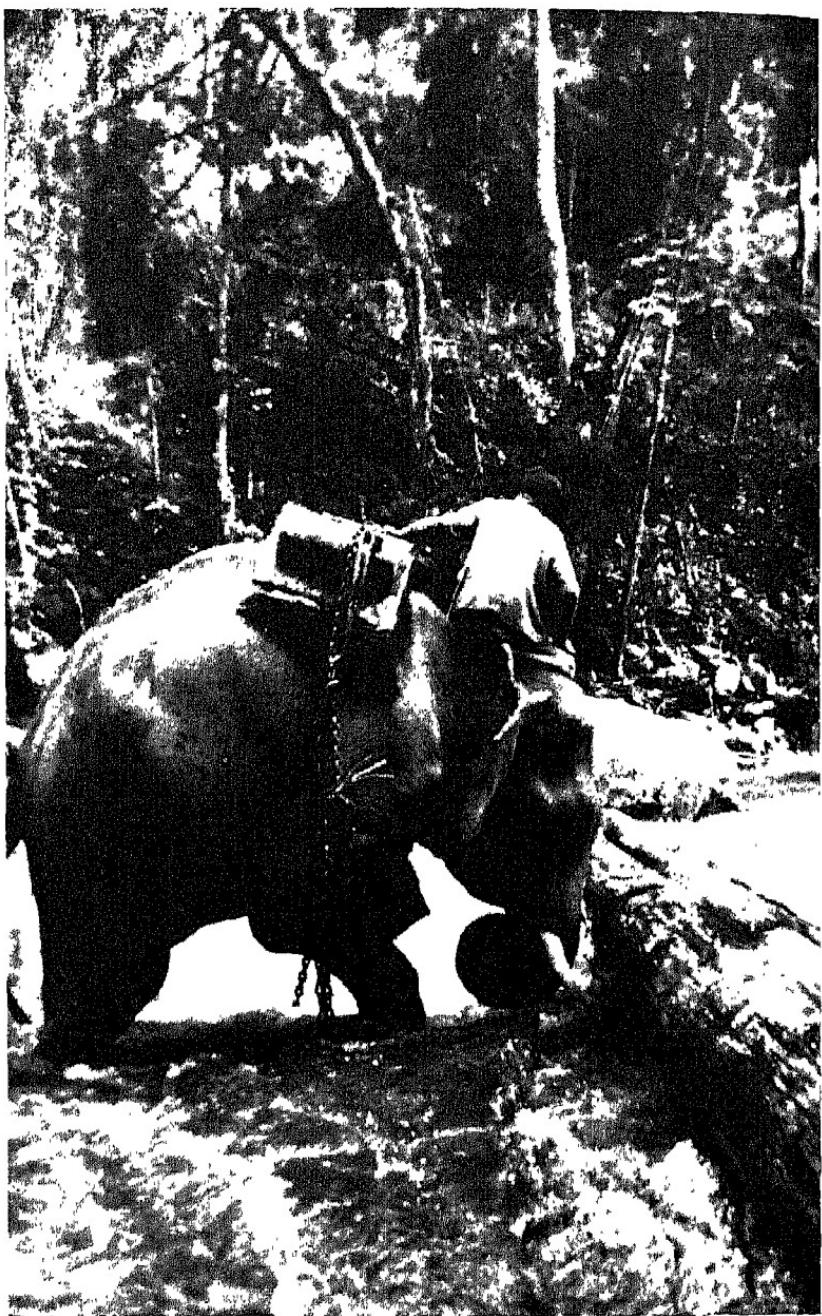
The steel cashbox, chained to my bed, was conspicuously not there and, at the thought of the large amount of money it contained, I broke into a cold sweat even as I called for the No. 1 boy. He came at the double and burst into tears before I could say a word deluging me with a gurgling Karen explan-



Tusker in a "crush" ready for an operation



(Right)  
Close up of an ele-  
phant in "crush"



(Courtesy J. R. Martin)

'Aunging'

ation the while. Not speaking that lingo at all well I had things repeated, sobbingly, in the Lao dialect.

The gist of the matter seemed to be that he and his brother, the No. 2 boy, had come along shortly after my departure, tidied the place up, and taken my clothes to wash them in the stream. At that time all was well but when they returned about an hour later the cashbox was gone. They had followed two sets of footprints up the muddy track behind the house, so they said, and without waiting to hear more I shot barefoot from the house to do a spot of sleuthing, only to learn that they had already found the box.

"Where is the damn thing now?" I asked feverishly.

"In the bungalow," was the welcome reply.

A dash back to the house to unearth the battered box from its hiding place in a sack revealed that it was still intact except for a broken handle. Now, with the \$64 question answered, I could calm down and study the situation.

"Who did it?" I asked.

"Tip and Seng, two of the new coolies, but we are scared they will attack us if we accuse them."

"Not to worry, I'll handle them, but how do you know it was these two men?"

"We recognized their footprints." Jungle instinct to the fore I thought to myself.

"Would you recognize the prints again?" they were then asked.

"Yes, but that wouldn't prove anything as the morning rain has blurred the tracks the thieves made."

Enough proof for me, I thought, and set about staging an identification parade. The two Karens were sent out of camp under escort and a smooth patch of mud was prepared in which every man in camp, plus a few outsiders for good measure, was made to stand barefoot to record his prints. When all was ready the No. 1 boy, Mee, was called up.

"Which two sets of prints did you see on the path this morning?" he was asked, and after sniffing around like a game dog for a time he pointed decisively to two pairs of footprints.

He was sent away and his brother, Hom, came up. After the same question and another scrutiny the same two pairs were chosen and they did, in fact, belong to Tip and Seng.

"How can you be sure?"

They didn't know but proceeded to name other people from

the prints and were correct every time, and one had to conclude that, having spent their lives in the jungle, they had retained certain instincts which were lost to urban dwellers, and could read tracks in much the same way that a postman read street signs.

I didn't doubt their accuracy, or suspect their honesty for a minute, and Nai's Tip and Seng were summoned and told that, although the proof of their guilt was washed away, I was quite certain that they had tried to steal my money. For their behaviour they would be paid off in the evening and leave camp next morning.

After a splendid show of injured innocence Tip and Seng then accused my two Karen's of being the true culprits—a move which I had expected and cut little ice. They left the house muttering darkly about injustice, etc.

Soon Mee and Hom were back, streaming tears, and asking to sleep in my bedroom that night as threats had been made against their lives.

The charming Tip and delightful Seng were recalled and told:

"I've changed my mind, you won't be leaving in the morning as I said (satisfied smirks), you're leaving immediately."

Consternation!

"But Nai, it's nearly dark."

"Damn good. I hope a tiger gets you. In any case a policeman will be here tomorrow to look into your activities."

The imminent arrival of a non-existent policeman clinched matters and not only did the two rogues go but their three friends vanished as well, all without claiming any back pay. I learnt later that all five had just finished an opium-carrying trip and didn't relish any police questioning.

From Huay Pladook I moved over the hills into the Huay Ngua, Bullock Creek, where Kay was running the work and arrived at his small bungalow, perched high over the stream in a dark and secretive spot, to find him sweating out one of his frequent bouts of malaria.

Kay had almost a hundred elephants in his area and was worried because they had, after a good start, nearly all been taken away during his illness. A series of elephant thefts had so upset the Karen's that they had withdrawn their animals to a distant creek for safety, thus bringing the work to a standstill. It required a promise of extra police patrols, and a lecture on

their spineless behaviour to induce the elephant owners back to work.

Karens are good, tough jungle people, none better, but have an inferiority complex where the Siamese are concerned, so they were advised on how to set up a warning system and act together when further thefts occurred. This put some stiffening into them and by the time thieving let up in the following year they were quite enthusiastic about "collective security" and were thirsting to catch up with a party of thieves. To see the little men leaping up hills like gazelles with a full complement of guns, swords and spears convinced one that the pursuit was no empty gesture.

Kay thought that a robbery had also been planned on his cashbox during his illness. He had been in bed, cursing a sleepless night of malaria, when his bedroom door opened quietly to reveal a couple of silhouetted figures. Luckily his three half-bred hill dogs were not suffering from exhaustion, or anything else, and went bare-toothed for the open door which was hastily closed in their faces. A count of heads next morning showed that two coolies had departed during the night and, even though fact and fancy get well scrambled in one's mind during malaria, the missing coolies bore out his impressions.

I stayed with Kay until he was feeling better then moved back to the forest H.Q. where everything was ticking along nicely under Nai Boon Low, our forest supervisor. Things really got back to normal with Pah We Do wanting more money. He was in fact one of our smaller contractors but required more attention than the biggest.

On receiving the money he sat on the floor and the men with him squatted round in a circle whilst Pah We Do dealt out the money like playing cards, occasionally palming the extra note on to his own mounting pile, until all was issued.

The party left after presenting me with a small parcel of local tobacco and I tortured myself for a day or so with this coarse product before pronouncing it unsmokable.

Next time I met the aged gentleman I complained of a sore throat and asked *him* for medicine! This reversal of roles tickled him enormously.

After one or two bad mistakes in his contract area Pah We Do was called up to answer for them. The call coincided with a three-day celebration in his village and when he eventually arrived, leaning heavily on two friends and in the midst of a

tropical downpour, it was obvious that any reprimand would not achieve much.

The alcoholic trio meandered along the path, with frequent halts to pick each other out of the mud, and came into the bungalow in great spirits. Though rain was washing furrows in their mud-stained clothing Pah We Do still retained his furl'd gamp protectively under one arm. A large black umbrella seems to be a badge of authority amongst Karen elders and, far from opening it to protect their tattooed hides during a downpour, I have seen such articles being concealed under their clothing for safety! The reprimand was not delivered and they left after urging me, strongly but in vain, to go and join their party.

The same evening I heard that Pah We Do had been trying to climb aboard an elephant for some unspecified reason and had fallen off on his head. I felt sure the old boy would make light of such treatment but next morning there was some solemn drumming from the village and I was told that someone had died during the party and a funeral celebration was now starting.

The thought that my disreputable old friend had died upset me all morning and I was thinking what a grand old chap he had been when I stalked a ghostly apparition, a sober Pah We Do with his head swathed in bloody bandages, to apologize for his earlier unseemly behaviour and to ask for yet more time off to bury one of his villagers. All my irritation was poured out on the old vulture, wasted of course, then he was granted the necessary leave.

The Oriental approach to death is one of stoic fatalism, sometimes classed as callous cynicism by the unenlightened. Funeral ceremonies, Karen ones certainly, also differ from the Western conception of genteel behaviour. Though Orientals feel grief and pain, just as Occidentals do, when near relatives or friends die it is unseemly to show excessive emotion, so that a stranger to the customs might imagine that he was seeing a gay festival. Not so, the underlying sadness is there all right but refuge is taken in laughter, with tears showing through at times.

The women act like professional mourners keeping up a high pitched keening whilst a drum and flute band plays incessantly. The men sit around reciting anecdotes in which the deceased played a creditable part just as if he were still amongst them. Laughter, feasting and drinking send the man on his

last journey with happy and familiar sounds in his ears. Just one more farewell party, this time the very last one so let's make it a good one, seems to be the keynote. Such, at least, is their Animistic belief.

With the funeral over and Pah We Do back at work we were approaching mid-season and the wettest of the rainy weather. Even so we had, by dint of some elaborate drainage work, got a thriving kitchen garden producing a variety of local vegetables until one night Me Nullah stealthily broke through the fence. She was eating her way grimly along the rows of sweet corn when detected and compounded the damage by trampling round the garden a few times before plunging through the fence into surrounding jungle, and I rather regretted the "cure by kindness" which Kay and I were trying out on her.

Though small she was tremendously strong and should have been an asset to any working camp but her intractable temper made her almost unworkable. Kay and I had the theory that her misdeeds had been so exaggerated by each successive mahout that she was accorded rough treatment whether she did right or wrong and had got to the stage of expecting a smack on the head if she did anything at all.

She was awarded to one of the headmen, though he considered that the arrival of the problem child in his camp was a prime misfortune, with strict orders that she was not to be beaten whatever crime she committed. Now, with gentle treatment, she grew a fine crop of stiff black bristles on her brow as denoted by one of Kay's entries in the log book. "She now has the finest head of hair in the forest." This provoked some facetious entries from other assistants, "Better than mine?" from Melton and "Get yer 'air cut" from Rogers, but the fact was that Me Nullah became more tractable and, in the company of other animals, would drag well. Alone she was still the bitch we knew of old.

Though illnesses like malaria, dysentery and beri-beri can now be cured by modern drugs they are all prevalent in the jungle during the rainy season. The wetter the weather the more the sickness and, since the height of the rains is the peak of the felling period, the more the work for everybody. By forcing the pace in the worst weather trees are felled on soft ground with a minimum of breakage and the elephant, the all important, does its heaviest toil in conditions which suit it ideally—lush dripping vegetation, mud and super-abundant water. The long grind in the rains with health always a little

below par leaves everyone jaded and irritable so that the start of the sparkling cold weather in November was greeted with the same enthusiasm as an Eskimo might salute the Midnight Sun after his long winter night. Health and spirits improved almost overnight.

A check about this time in our local "Woolworths" showed that the Beauty Girl face powder was selling like hot cakes and I was told that with the arrival of the cold weather the Karens eased up a little to go visiting each other's villages. The powder, it seemed, was an essential part of the young bucks' make-up.

Soon after this I nearly fell out of my boots with laughter when I met a party of young swains headed for amorous dalliance in a nearby village. One of the hallmarks of physical beauty amongst Karens, and indeed amongst Orientals in general, is a fair skin. Anyone not blessed with a naturally fair skin could still compete on almost even terms by the generous use of powder and the reason for our heavy sales was visible in the chalky masks which I saw that day. No Karen was going to blight his chances with a village belle by arriving a shade darker than his companions.

They were dressed in the height of jungle fashion which was, basically, working clothing with embellishments. The greasy hat was transformed by a cockade of mixed feathers and tassels of orange-coloured flowers which overhung the brim like ragged thatching and sprouted from numerous holes in the crown; the buttonholes of the tattered jacket were blocked with red thistle-like flowers and more of the same hung from a broad leather belt.

The face beneath the hat was a chalky mask gashed by red dyed lips; the pierced ears were filled with a variety of objects—small ivory drums, glass brilliants, flowers, silver paper and one whole cigarette were noted in passing. Oriental "pansies" one might think, which couldn't have been a bigger mistake in judging these tough little men.

A few carried swords slung by a cord under the left armpit but these were yet another accessory to impress the maidens with their sword dancing skill. In this acrobatic sport the man wields the sword in flashing horizontal circles at knee level and leaps over his own razor-sharp blade in a complicated dance rhythm. All that is needed to succeed at this sport is the eye of a hawk, the agility of a panther and timing geared to split seconds. Any mistakes are paid for with slashed legs.

All felling was stopped in November to prevent excessive breakage as the trees toppled on to hardening ground and the emphasis was transferred to extraction and preparations for measuring. Checking inspections were the order of the day and the Huay Pladook bungalow, now rebuilt at ground level, was a frequent stopping place.

On one visit an incident, rather unusual in my experience, occurred involving a female elephant belonging to a Karen. This animal was heavily pregnant but had made no effort to team up with an "Aunty"—another female which associates itself just before, during and after calf-birth with the parent to share the defence of the calf against tiger attack. A lone elephant is not nearly agile enough to keep a fast-moving tiger from a toothsome morsel like a baby calf but two girls together, with the calf between them, are usually capable of keeping it safe though at the expense of terribly lacerated flanks caused by the cat's clawing efforts to stampede the adults.

The mother-to-be, Meh Mee, was in the habit of grazing in a nearby stream, the Huay Chang Tie (Dead Elephant Creek), and to her owner's surprise and delight she presented him with a fine calf one night in a completely solo effort.

The mahout when he went out next day found Meh Mee proudly standing guard over a wobbly calf at the maternity ground—a stamped out patch of grassland on the edge of the creek. Stopping only long enough to see that both animals were well he raced back to camp to spread the news, and I went along to view the scene.

One must assume that some elephants are born stupid and Meh Mee seemed to take the prize in this respect. With no Aunty to help out she had chosen a maternity ward which offered a perfect attacking site for a tiger; a small hollow with high rocks on one side which were an ideal take-off point for the cat's first spring. Luckily no tiger was in the area but the owner was taking no chances and put an armed guard on the animals to prevent the stream further justifying its name.

At about six hours old the calf was some two hundred pounds in weight, grey-black in colour with pink blotches on ears and throat, with wiry black bristles on the backbone and forehead and was, altogether, a delightful miniature of the adult animal. The trunk, later to grow into a powerful appendage thicker than a man's thigh, was a ridiculous tube; the brown eyes rolled grotesquely as it stood on trembling legs or collapsed like an empty sack only to be nudged erect again by the mother.

There was no chance of moving it in such condition, nor would the mother have allowed it, but in a few days a small procession meandered into the camp with the calf under its own steam. The baby moved in a hurried shamble, frequently dashing between mother's forelegs for refuge as strange sights and sounds scared it. From that stronghold a pair of anguished eyes surveyed a hostile world until, with fear forgotten, it was ready to amble forth again.

At an early age calves begin to ape the actions of their elders, putting a terrific sense of slapstick comedy into the act, and quickly become the spoiled favourites of the camp.

Against orders workmen often tease calves; a few pokes with a long stick puts on a comic turn with the babe racing out from between mother's legs with widespread ears, raised trunk and the light of battle in its eyes. Within a few paces it falters, loses courage then races back to safety. As calves grow older, and this is particularly true of young tuskers, the race from mother's side gets longer until the day comes when a workman finds himself treed by an irate calf which kept going and, moreover, a calf with quite enough weight and strength to trample him flat.

Up to the age of about six years, when the first training begins, the calf wanders with its mother and is usually a prime nuisance during working hours. This is particularly so when Ma is working on steep slopes or in deep water and it is not uncommon to see the fond parent deal her offspring a smart pat with her trunk if it becomes too obstructive.

On a later visit to Huay Pladook another incident involving elephants ended less happily. A contractor there with a tusker and two female elephants was getting behind on his deliveries and decided to buy an additional tusker to help the work along. After a period of searching he arrived with a new tusker which I was asked to comment on. It was truly a splendid animal in the prime of life; tall, heavily muscled, broad back falling sharply to stocky hind legs, and a massive head tapering down past well-shaped tusks to a powerful trunk. Any timber company would have been proud to own it and I made some flattering comments on the man's choice of animal.

During its first night in the area there was a storm of angry trumpeting on the ridge behind the bungalow and plenty of commotion in the working camps. Next morning a very depressed contractor came along to say that one of his tuskers was dead. My immediate thought was that the man had bought

a savage tusker which had put paid to the resident tusker, and great was my surprise to learn that the reverse was the case.

The resident tusker, a smaller, older animal but blessed with long pointed tusks, must have resented the new arrival and had gone for it during the night.

I went to the scene of the battle and found a large area of jungle trampled flat, small trees uprooted or broken off short and smears of blood everywhere. Obviously the fight had not been one-sided but there was no sign of either live or dead combatant.

"Where are they?" seemed a fair question.

"The live one has head injuries and is tied up nearby. The dead one is down there," pointing down a steep gulley.

From the lip of the gulley we could see the elephant below us—balanced on end with its head dug into the stream bed, neck broken, one tusk splintered and its hind legs straight up in the air.

We climbed down to the body, reconstructing events as we went, and concluded that the winner had downed his opponent on the edge, either dead or still living, and as a final gesture had pushed it over. The nose-dive into the gulley had certainly finalized matters. An ignominious end for such a fine beast.

When fighting, a tusker will usually try to get behind its enemy to stab between the hind legs. Such wounds, though small on the surface, do great internal damage and generally prove fatal. The dead animal bore such tusk wounds and others along the flanks but there was surprisingly little blood—the winner seemed to have shed most of that from surface scratches.

It was impossible to move the body from its confined position so arrangements were made to burn it *in situ* as a precaution against the spread of disease.

Elephant deaths in restricted sites called to my mind the case of a Company elephant which had died some years earlier in our northern forests, and very inconveniently in the centre of an irrigation canal supplying a large rice-growing area.

Burning was tried but failed, cutting up for piecemeal removal also failed and finally a road was made to the corpse which was hauled out by a motor crane and driven, slung like a yo yo on a string, to a patch of dry jungle where burning was completed.

This must have been one of the oddest loads ever suspended

from a crane and surely the only case of an elephant being driven to its last resting place on a hearse!

The subject of "last resting places" of wild elephants is one that has come in for plenty of speculation. There is a romantic notion that they move to ancestral burial grounds and there, presumably, ivory is yards deep on the ground. My knowledge of wild elephants is slight, but sufficient to suggest that the idea is a charming piece of fiction. The vision of an elephant which feels itself to be dying staggering through the jungle to some distant point which it has obviously never visited whilst alive, then casting itself down to die with a sigh of satisfaction in the tremendous boneyard made by its ancestors, seems far-fetched and, moreover, it has still to be proved.

Everyone who has had dealings with elephants will probably agree that they seem rather more than mere animals in their conduct and level of intelligence but distinctly sub-human enough not to care where their bones end up.

A more feasible explanation could be based along the following lines. When animals are sick their dearest wish, like that of certain film stars, is to be left alone, and I suggest that wild elephants wander off to some isolated spot deep in the jungle to die with a minimum of fuss.

The fact that elephant skeletons and ivory are not found in the forest is easily accounted for; firstly the jungle is vast and largely trackless, with huge tracts of it unvisited even by hunters from one year's end to the next, and an elephant would naturally choose such country to die in. The resident carrion would quickly strip the meat off the bones which would then be cracked for the succulent marrow, whilst persistent animals like the porcupine could gnaw through the ivory to reach the large, tender, pulpy mass inside the tusk. The eradication would be completed by countless millions of decay bacteria working at a speed unheard of in non-tropical areas, so that after a few years no trace of the dead animal would be left. Such at least is my view.

I commiserated with the contractor on his loss and agreed that, with only two females and a battered tusker, he had more than he could cope with and would be allowed to finish his work in the next season then left him, bewailing his fate, to return to the Company camps.

They were waiting, with some impatience, for my final inspection and at the end of February after a mass review they were sent off for the annual three month holiday. All of them,

except the anti-social and butterfat Me Nullah, had earned their leave.

After a further month spent in the tedious but vital task of measuring the year's harvest I left the forest myself to let off some highly concentrated steam.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### MORE DISTANT JUNGLES

THE PERSPIRING hot season burnt itself out soon enough and we faced the start of the second year's felling in the Me Tun forest. By now I was exalted to Assistant Manager and, with the help of four assistants working out from Raheng station, confronted with a rush even more frenzied than the previous year. Apart from a record year of timber-rafting in the offing, we were due to open up the remainder of the vast Me Tun areas and boost the working strength to over five hundred elephants and two thousand men.

I arrived in the forest to start the working season and found plenty of chores needing my attention. Firstly there was a Karen who had owed the Company money for years. We held this man's elephant paper as security but the animal was reported to have died, and repeated demands never produced a penny in hard cash. As a last gesture, and largely in the way of bluff, the man was contacted through Pah We Do and told that if the cash wasn't forthcoming quickly we should arrange to have him gaoled for debt. The thought of a Karen in a Siamese gaol upset the clan so much that they clubbed together, paid the man's debt, then seized the elephant, newly resurrected for the occasion, and worked it until the debt was considered cleared.

Next the Leesaw got temperamental. With the increased tempo of felling in all areas we were keen to get more labour, and the headman in the Leesaw village in the Huay Ngua was sent for. These people had previously offered to do contract felling and, with their unsurpassed skill in felling big timber quickly, we were keen to hire them.

The headman and a small party of black-clad Leesaws duly arrived, talked the matter over and agreed on rates of payment. They were to return to their village next day and collect the felling party and I felt pleased at having got the job settled so quickly.

To my surprise they lined up before me next morning early to say that our deal was off. When pressed for a reason they

agreed that the proposed payments were good enough but said that they had heard frogs croaking in the night and so were unable to do the work. This began to look like a comic turn!

"What on earth have frogs got to do with it?" I queried, and through an interpreter came the answer:

"Frogs are a bad omen to our people and bring sickness."

So far as they were concerned this explained everything and they departed for their high hills. Thinking over the matter I began to see their association of ideas. Frogs—stagnant water—breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes—malarial sickness. At the altitude at which the Leesaw live both frogs and malaria are uncommon visitors.

Finally a contractor, introduced by Pah We Do, defected with a tidy amount of money. This man had asked for a small dragging contract and produced an elephant's paper as security against an advance of cash. The animal was supposed to be resting in a creek many days' journey away so Pah We Do's word for its existence was accepted, the man received his money and left to bring in his workmen.

He was never seen again but eventually Pah We Do was prodded into looking for him and came back with the news that the wily gentleman had sold his elephant, having provided us with the registration paper of a long dead one, and had run away from his village. He kept running and smoking opium, bought with Company money, until a year or so later when we heard that he had died. Some said from too much opium, others said from T.B., but no one suggested that the reason was a broken heart, caused from shame at cheating the Company.

Pah We Do's fall from grace perturbed him rather less than his fall from the elephant's head and he remained as cheerful and friendly as before. His unbreakable armour of indifference to hard words and hard knocks made him exasperating at times, particularly when he drew my sting by sympathizing with my rage and saying how much more angry he would be in my place!

Having got the Samare Luang work in motion I moved over the hills to the Huay Nguia to visit Kay and see the new godown. The stores' clerk there had been having his own troubles and said that he had been visited by brigands who had demanded a free supply of food. This was the same group of Bannar toughs that had organized a steady income for them-

selves by selling "protection" to the elephant contractors, who, rather than risk valuable elephants, usually paid up.

The clerk, Nai Chan, had rather pluckily told these amateur brigands that if they brought a signed chit from me they could have all the free food they could carry. He now asked for a gun to protect himself from the "protectors" and was issued with a Company weapon—a .44 Winchester carbine of ancient vintage and a few equally decrepit cartridges which I felt sure would all be duds.

The gun seemed good for his morale but to my astonishment he had bowled over a sambhur deer within a week. Kay and I were passing near his camp when we put up a doe in thick grass. It circled to emerge near the godown fence with its beautiful gliding stride covering ground very fast. Nai Chan, who had been watching, jacked in a greasy cartridge and let fly to bring the huge deer down in a crumpled heap. He couldn't have been more surprised than we were!

Knowing that a nice piece of venison had been sent to my kitchen I looked forward to a tasty meal in place of the usual stringy chicken. Not so, the villainous cook served a stringier chicken than usual garnished with bullet-hard beans and potatoes delicately flavoured with kerosene through intimate contact with a leaking fuel tin, then ended the feast by serving a caramel custard made from an exquisitely rotten egg. After a hot sticky morning in the jungle this garbage seemed like the final insult to my suffering stomach and the cook earned a long overdue dismissal. Just the absence of his criminal features in camp improved both my health and appetite.

Thinking back on jungle meals I now realize how poor some of them were. True, the best cooks refused to go to the jungle, food was hard to get and often cooked under difficult conditions, but it could have been much better if we healthy bachelors had chivvied our cooks to greater efforts. Only an outdoor life and a first-class digestion enabled one to cope with some of the burnt offerings which were inflicted on Master's body. An idle calculation one evening convinced me that I personally had accounted for almost two thousand scraggy chickens during the course of seven years—fried, boiled, roasted, toasted, burnt and raw.

Kay and I inspected the working area together then I left, travelling upstream to the Company camps which were sited in the isolated headwaters of the Huay Ngua. Our Siamese supervisor, Nai Boon Low, who was responsible for seeing that

the headmen carried out orders in my absence, was leading the way carrying a shotgun. We had just passed a female elephant and calf being led downstream when a tremendous piercing scream rang out ahead of us and over the horizon steamed another female sporting neither bell nor clapper. Her ears stood straight out from her head and, with untied hobble clinking and the trailing tying chain whirring over the ground like an angry snake, she bore down on us like a runaway train.

Nai Boon Low let a barrel go over her head and she screamed a bit louder but kept coming. It was not really running country but we ran all right, thorns and rocks notwithstanding, with the firm impression that the one dangerous female in the creek was after us. The prospect of being stamped flat by an enraged pachyderm produced more speed than months of training could have done! From various hiding places we heard her crashing past and away downstream still squealing.

Then followed contented rumbling and we realized that it had been a false alarm. "Aunty" had stayed behind then suddenly realized that Mother and calf had vanished ahead. She had been making all speed to rejoin them regardless of obstacles like mere men.

This hurried scramble away from an elephant reminded me of the experience of the Forest Manager of another company who was taking his wife and small baby out to the jungle with him one cold season. He was walking along the trail, some distance ahead of his family, when he found himself contesting the right of way with a charging tusker in an evil frame of mind. He could have avoided the hobbled animal but doubted if his wife and infant were mobile enough to do likewise so turned and raced down the path ahead of the animal to warn them. It seems to have been a touch-and-go sprint with the hobbled beast sheering off into the jungle before it reached his family—luckily elephants tire very quickly when going at speed in hobbles! One can well imagine the man's state of mind as he ran the race of his life down that jungle track.

We travelled on to Soop Nam Wahn, mouth of the Sweetwater Creek, without further incident and I settled down to two weeks' stay in the small bungalow there—rather a long halt in my nomadic existence. Its situation on a small tongue of land cleared from the virgin jungle, with two fast rocky mountain streams meeting at the bottom of the garden gave it an air of unworldly solitude which always pleased me.

Our nearest neighbours were Mooser tribespeople living five uphill miles away in the sources of the Huay Nguia. We had a little friction with them initially when some of our long-distance grazing elephants got into their corn crops. We were very willing to give them generous compensation but the preposterous claims which they made for damages weren't to be entertained. They seemed to have taken the phrase "golden corn" quite literally in their calculations! Most of the claims were scaled right down and this roused their ire so that, for a time, relations were strained. There were dark hints that the next elephant entering their gardens would be made a pin-cushion for poisoned arrows but gradually relations improved and we were able to provide them with some welcome income by buying their corn, beans, cabbage, potatoes and tomatoes (the latter being almost a weed in hill gardens). Some opium too filtered into the camps from this source but I never knew about it, officially.

All the hill tribes grew first-class vegetables and it became one of the commoner sights to see files of black-clad Moosers leaning forward into the broad head straps, which held the heavy produce baskets on their backs, as they made the rounds of our camps.

During one afternoon siesta at Soop Nam Wahn, and whilst the Mooser were still on edge over the garden damage inflicted by our elephants, I was disturbed by stealthy noises in the bathroom followed by the door opening quietly to reveal four or five funereally garbed hillmen all sporting swords. They weren't doing anything, but being awakened by groups of fierce-eyed, black-toothed, and obviously unwashed gentlemen was sufficiently unusual to make me wonder. I reached for a gun, just in case, and they fled.

The No. 1 boy then came up to explain that the Mooser had been consumed with curiosity to see how the first white man they had ever seen lived, but had been told that I might be very short tempered if wakened—not a complete lie at that! Even so, good old-fashioned curiosity had to be satisfied and they had crept up quietly, had a quick look then departed at speed.

My stay in that sylvan spot was made memorable by the arrival of mail. The mail delivery was just about the most important single event in the lives of us teak wallahs and this one was particularly welcome since it was three weeks overdue. The two mailmen had been delayed by floods and sickness, then wasted more time by returning to the wrong part of the forest,



Clearing logs in rapids



"Aunging" log in rapids



Fixing wire rope to jammed logs. (Both men swept away a few seconds after photo taken—p. 178)

so making their round trip one of five weeks instead of the usual two.

These men, who travelled in pairs for safety, were by way of being favoured citizens who were picked with some care, as lost or stolen letters or accidentally (?) broken bottles of whisky were misfortunes to be avoided at all costs. Everything took second place whilst one greeted the returning messengers like long-lost brothers.

After weeks when one had no chance to speak one's native language, except to think aloud in it, the outside contact with family and friends, even though only on paper, assumed an importance which it is hard to convey. Wireless broadcast certainly was a boon, but mail was a much more personal thing. Letters could not be opened quickly enough, no nonsense with paper knives and neatly sliced envelopes, and such was the pleasure of seeing familiar handwriting that often the gist of the letter only penetrated on the second reading. Magazines, circulars, even official "rockets" from the Manager were all welcomed as extra links with "outside" and it was a black day indeed when the mail only produced a few bills or dunning letters. On such occasions one was reduced to reading the labels on one's sauce bottles—profound material which I can still quote years later!

The inspections in this area were a real weight-reducing course and our Company camps, working the steep rocky country, were having a hard time of it. I noted during my visit that waterfalls would make extraction later in the year something of a nightmare, and was able to chuckle for the *n*th time over an incident concerning them.

The Lao word for waterfall is *tart* and a Company assistant, R. B., in the course of one of his reports had noted that "The presence of numerous Tarts is holding up work."

The august gentlemen in our Head Office in London seized on this startling piece of gossip and replied to the then Forest Manager: "We suggest that R. B. takes immediate steps to have these immoral young ladies removed from his forest!"

R. B.'s comments were almost certainly unprintable.

Three days' march over the hills, passing Ban Leesaw *en route*, took me from the Sweetwater creek into Huay Tak, Parched Creek, where Rogers was holding the fort and indulging in a battle of wills with the strong-man contractor who had assembled 135 elephants for a very large contract. It was arranged that we would inspect all these animals at one time.

The morning chosen turned out wet and dismal but that was no novelty and the contractor was told to bring up the elephants in small groups to our position near the bungalow. Our choice of site was ill-advised to say the least and after several hundred tons of elephant had churned through the soft ground our camp area was a shambles—enough mud and elephant dung to fill the Augean stables.

The object of the inspection was to check that the contractor had his full complement and that the animals were adult workers—not a motley bunch of calves co-opted to make up the numbers. After about twenty animals had been passed we became suspicious, in fact certain, that No. 21 was coming up for the second time. The mahout was changed but the beast had certain distinguishing marks which made her easy to pick out. Obviously the contractor was several animals short and trying to make the count up to 135 by a few duplicate appearances. He was reprimanded and made to start the parade again.

This time the inspected animals were sent to stand on a grassy flat in full view to prevent further incidents. One hundred and thirty pachyderms, that was the final count, make a vast herd to have in a small area at one time and it felt as if all the elephants in the world were passing our front door that morning. Strings of animals came up, quick notes were made on their names, sex and working ability, then on they went to join previously inspected beasts.

By the end of the inspection there was a concentration of elephants, on a very few acres of grassland, which can seldom have been equalled. To say that it was an impressive sight understates the case badly.

Rogers, a very able assistant, had the area well in hand and had almost crushed the spark of rebellion in the contractor's eye so that, after going over the work with him, I felt free to return to my own vast backyard, the Samare Luang. At that time his one failing was a red-hot temper but he put a strong curb on it whilst in the Huay Tak, after a domestic tangle had shown him the way the wind was blowing.

One morning he had called for tea at the usual time and after a stony silence from his cookhouse had gone to investigate only to find that his disgruntled servants had upped and left in a body during the night. After a week or more of doing his own cooking whilst trying to keep up a very heavy working schedule he changed from a roaring lion into a roaring lamb.

Shortly after I had got back to the Samare Luang bungalow

one of my transport animals, Poo Chee, which had been on rather light work, went on musth. The approach of this dangerous state was first suspected when he tried to savage his travelling companion, Poo Tao. The condition was soon confirmed by an oily discharge from the musth glands—these lie, one on each side of the head, midway between the eye and ear and are inconspicuous normally.

Musth, the very dangerous condition generally associated with the term, is a state of supercharged sexual excitement, confined to male elephants and during an attack, which usually lasts about ten days, the musth animal is dangerous to any living thing—even rocks and trees are sometimes mistaken for enemies and come in for some vicious attention. Other elephants recognize the condition and give the afflicted animal as wide a berth as possible, particularly the females who might be injured by a half-crazed tusker during the course of some masterful love-making. Me Too Looie, one of our females, swung a stiff hind leg for years as the result of just one such attack.

Musth usually occurs in the non-working season when the tusker has stored up some surplus energy. The hard work during the rains tend to dissipate or hold the condition in check but even then it breaks out on occasion and is dealt with in two ways. The Karen method and the sensible method.

Karens are not given to pampering their animals when there is work on hand, and counter musth by working the animal so hard that it is too tired to run amok. This usually succeeds but the chance of a sudden spurt of anger, in which the mahout and bystanders might be trampled flat before the beast bolts un-fettered into the jungle to become the terror of a wide area, is always present. Some of the uninsurable risks taken by Karens at these times verge on the suicidal.

Our own method, in common with most timber companies, was always "safety first". As soon as fluid was seen coming from the glands the tusker was tied to a large tree, within reach of water, by extra heavy chains on each foreleg in addition to the usual hobbles. Here the animal was hand-fed on non-stimulating types of fodder and perspiring coolies had the chore of carrying more than a ton of food to the captive animal during each week of its confinement.

As the attack developed the oily discharge trickled down the cheek towards the corner of the mouth and the generally held belief is that when the fluid reaches the mouth and the animal

can taste it the behaviour reaches a peak of violence. Certainly a tusker always seems most dangerous at that time.

For long periods Poo Chee stood in brooding immobility with sunken head and dull eyes then, for no apparent reason, exploded into frenzies. Out went the ears like ragged sails, the trunk towered up to emit screams of rage or beat out a booming tattoo on the ground as he wrestled with his confining chains until they resembled snarled fishing line.

The restraining tree came in for particular hatred and was gored into splinters wherever the tusks could reach it. There are instances of elephants snapping their tusks off in the wood at such times and, if the animal seems liable to injure itself, efforts are made to feed a sedative—usually opium.

Sulks and frenzies alternated until Poo Chee was over his temporary madness; then he was released, a thinner and vastly more tired beast, for a rest and a tonic course of strychnine-arsenic pills. We were saved the task of bringing the animal back to fitness as a contractor bought him almost at once. The old veteran was in such poor shape that we tried to dissuade the contractor but he coveted Poo Chee's enormous size and splendid tusks and insisted on paying an astronomical price to acquire the animal even though we stressed the fact that it was old and asthmatic.

It should perhaps be noted that, whilst only males are dangerous on musth, both sexes have musth glands. The female emits fluid when on heat and at the time of calf-birth, and some years after Poo Chee's illness I saw Me Boon Mee, with a four-hours-old calf, giving out plenty of oily fluid but not in the least perturbed. The headman in charge told me that this was usual but that the flow stopped altogether very few hours after birth.

After two years' work we had an enormous glut of logs lying along the banks of the Samare Luang creek and, rather than trust the temperamental stream to float this timber down to the parent Me Tun River it was decided to bring in timber trucks to move the logs.

During the previous year our friendly rivals, the Corporation, had hacked a trucking road through their Me Taw creek for thirty miles and by adding a further thirty on to their route we were able to get the trucks in. We had a score of bridges to build on our own side of the hill and, rather than repair a similar number of wrecked ones on the Me Taw side it was decided to winch our trucks through the Me Taw crossings and leave them in the forest for two years.

The transport of petrol and spares proved a nightmare but by adding extra gearboxes to old army vehicles the contractor produced some almost unstoppable machines which ferried equipment to the jungle during dry season, with a good deal of difficulty. Not so much difficulty to be sure as was experienced in one of our Chieng Mai forests where the trucks had to be dismantled and carried over a mountain on the backs of elephants and ponies before they could be used to cart a very isolated creek. When that work was finished the trucks were abandoned in the jungle.

The first trucks into the Samare Luang astonished the local Karens vastly, and they fled into the bushes whenever one came near, but in a very short while they had decided that this form of transport was superior to walking and could be seen enthusiastically hitch-hiking their way about.

With trucks and motorized cranes queueing up for work there was a grinding rush of measuring work in an effort to keep the mechanical monsters fully occupied. One morning we halted our labours long enough to watch a long crocodile of Moosers file silently past our measuring site. They had the furtive air of a village "on the run", and so it turned out to be. Local gossip had it that a police patrol had gone into the headwaters of the Huay Ngua on an opium search and that two policemen had been killed in a skirmish with the Mooser. I was too busy to follow up this rumour but the group supposedly responsible was certainly the Mooser party which passed us that morning on its way to the Burma border or points west.

A band of men led the convoy with shotguns and strung crossbows; the centre of the column was occupied by women, and old people who carried assorted goods and children or led a string of powerful, sleek-coated hill ponies bearing the heavy equipment; and the rear was brought up by another band of armed men. Whether guilty or innocent the tribe obviously expected some severe reprisal measures and had deserted their village to flee *en masse* to a new settlement on more distant hills. They were in for several very lean years whilst establishing new crops and must have felt pretty desperate. Certainly they formed a party which was not to be trifled with at that time and we were pleased enough to see the last of them.

The belief that troubles never come singly got plenty of support in the Me Tun about this time. Shortly after the Mooser episode I had a report that a lorry load of logs had slipped its chains and rolled off the truck, crushing a man to death. He

had to remain there, as is the law in cases of violent death, until an official could get to the scene to certify that the incident was a genuine accident. It took a week to make the round trip to the nearest seat of Government and, during this period, pending the decent burial of the unfortunate man, trucking came to a standstill.

Then, to complete the trio of incidents, Kay sent a note to say that there had been a murder in his area. This, it seemed, was the result of a tragically unfortunate blow aimed by a young boy who had scarcely reached his teens and came about as follows. A party of men had been out working since dawn with their elephants, leaving one man to guard the camp and prepare food for the evening meal. The workmen arrived back in camp, hot and tired at the end of a long day, to find that their cook had not only been too lazy to prepare food but had not even brought drinking water from the stream. In a burst of temper the small boy hit the cook with the first thing to hand, which happened to be a jungle knife, and then it was too late for remorse. The keen blade severed the cook's jugular vein and, despite all efforts to help, the man bled to death.

What had been meant as a peevish gesture now became a very ugly business indeed and the police had to be informed at once. A letter was prepared, detailing all the circumstances and excusing the boy as far as was reasonably possible, and sent off to the nearest police station which was three days' walk away. At this point I ceased to understand the Oriental mind, which selected as the safest messenger to carry the grim tidings none other than the murderer himself. The message was certainly delivered and in due course the boy arrived back under police escort at the scene of the crime.

After several sudden deaths following closely on each other it was almost comic relief to be able to treat the hypochondriac Karens. At all times they importuned me for medicines but in that cold season they seemed to think that I was conducting a National Health Service. They appeared with illnesses of all kinds and usually a few pills were handed out to get rid of them. This act of mercy cost little and earned plenty of goodwill but it was really getting out of hand when the men started bringing their children along as well.

Kay and I believed that half the value of the medicine was psychological; the faith that the foreigners' pill, any pill, would cure anything and to test the idea a number of sticks of chalk were chopped into roughly shaped pills. These were issued to

the growing number of hypochondriacs who generally reported a splendid gain in health after a course of such treatment. A small charge levied on genuine medicine for the genuinely ill gradually reduced the demand for it, but we did a brisk business in free, chopped chalk pills for some time.

Despite alarms and excursions work went on apace, with myself and the measuring staff sweating it out under a burning sun during the day then toiling well into the night computing the day's harvest. Not to be outdone the carting contractor brought in searchlights and worked his trucks round the clock with double shifts of drivers and we all ended up on an exhausting merry-go-round, each trying to keep one jump ahead of the other. The machines were the first to crack up and truck after truck collapsed under the hard pounding. The poorer machines were then cannibalized for spare parts and with these, and the indispensable nails, bits of wire, brute force and ingenuity, the better vehicles were kept rolling.

Measuring was eventually completed and in March I prepared to go into Raheng to sort out a small library of accumulated accounts. With the back of the carting work broken the contractor went on to single shift work and settled down to several more months of sustained work before the rains closed all his roads. Then he would be able to repair his trucks, almost rebuild some of them, and wait for yet another dry season in which to complete his contract.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THIRD HAIL AND LAST FAREWELL

As a result of carting and side-stream dragging we started the 1956 season with fifty thousand logs, some two million cubic feet of teak, lying in the main Me Tun creek (its name meaning twisting and lively was well justified by numerous bends and rapids) and I moved out there to start the work off, but not alone this time.

During a recent home leave I had married a charming Welsh girl, Morwyn, and she, together with our eight months old son, went with me.

Normally the jungle is thoroughly unsuitable for a woman in the rainy season, but the layout of work was such that it could be run from three bungalows and the main one was comfortably placed on the outskirts of a small village. Even at the best of times jungle life is harder on a woman than a man, as she does not have the absorbing interest of work and is thrown much more on her own resources. So that it says much for the pioneer spirit of both of them that not only did they tolerate the life but actively enjoyed most of it and were rather sorry finally to leave it all.

We left Raheng in early June and travelled upstream three days to Bannar by pole-boat with what seemed a colossal amount of kit, even though I had pruned and rejected as much again, and almost come to blows with Morwyn when insisting that some treasured knick-knack had to stay behind.

There are three schools of thought as to what one should travel with in the jungle; one says, "Take only the bare essentials and give the elephants light loads"; another says, "We have to live in the jungle and don't propose roughing it like week-end campers", and they take the lot; and the third says, "Any damn fool can be uncomfortable in the jungle", and they make themselves as cosy as possible without buckling the elephants at the knees.

At Bannar our kit was unloaded from the boat and the transport brought in from the jungle. Four elephants, eighteen ponies and ten bearers made a convoy that would cause any

teak wallah to shudder, regardless of which of the three views he held, but my consolation was the fact that this caravan would make us independent in our forest H.Q. for five months.

During this time I was to make two quick trips out of the forest for money, leaving my wife and child guarding the bungalow with the help of a policeman. It should perhaps be said quickly and softly, for the sake of masculine vanity (a tender flower), that the longest continuous jungle tour since the reopening of the teak forests after the Second World War was done by a woman, and in the rains at that!

The loading of the animals made me wince. The amount of extra kit collected by one wife and, particularly, one small boy with his formula foods and tinned stuff, was astounding. By the time it was all aboard both elephants and ponies were festooned like Christmas trees. Luckily the three days' walk was to be through easy country and after seeing the travelling circus on the way we could think about loading our most personal possession, young Richard.

The mailman, Nai Pan, with his long smooth stride, was selected as the most suitable carrier, and our infant lashed on his back with two broad strips of cloth in the native fashion. A head of sandy hair and two feet sporting bright red shoes were all that stuck out of the bundle as a very vocal small boy was borne along.

In honour of the occasion Pan had donned his best and newest shirt of native cloth and at the end of the first day's march we found that Richard had turned a startling blue colour wherever he had been in contact with it. It all washed off quite easily, but thereafter Pan did not need to be asked to wear his older and more faded shirts.

Richard loved this form of travelling from the word go and amused himself carrying on long conversations in gibberish and pulling his bearer's ears until the jogging motion sent him off to sleep.

Three days later we arrived at our main bungalow, the biggest bamboo edifice I ever saw, which was built in a charming setting. It was perched on the steep river bank facing over the water to the village paddy plain and the hills beyond, where the cleared tracts of the hill people mottled the dark green jungle-clad slopes. Downstream and just visible behind screening frangipani trees was a white-walled temple and behind that the attap roofs of Oom Warb village dotted amongst coconut palms.

Our *de-luxe* house, speaking in terms of jungle houses, had a living veranda as long as a cricket pitch and two bedrooms, each with attached bathroom. The compound, several acres of land cleared from the jungle and surrounded by a high bamboo palisade, was a small self-contained village in itself with living quarters for thirty or more people, two hen runs (one for Leghorns—the egg ration, and one for local birds—the meat ration), two pig-pens, eventually a bullock corral with fourteen hump-necked beasts, a dockyard with two river boats and the all-important water gauge.

The introduction of frangipani, hibiscus, jasmine, bougainvillea, flowering willow, roses and pinks did much to soften the sharp edges and, combined with the massed yellow blooms of the Ki-Lek trees round the fence, gave a pleasant floral setting which shamed my previous best efforts at "civilizing" jungle bungalows.

Morwyn added bamboo cot, swing and playpen for Richard, then rounded her efforts off with a garden seat. She next took up the study of ants and birds with such zeal that my own knowledge of them was eclipsed.

After a period of settling in, and with a reasonably smart policeman bivouacked at the gate, I felt free to leave on inspection trips to welcome the returning camps. Sixty elephants were spread along the creek ready to keep timber on the move and all were in great shape, except two.

Me Parn had been stolen from rest camp near the Burma border, by an ex-mahout with a grudge, and she was pursued by police for more than a year without success. Every time they were hot on the trail Me Parn was marched into Burma, leaving our men fuming on the wrong side of the border.

The other was Poo Thong Bow, The Golden Watermaker, and he was dead. On the return from rest camps the various headmen had travelled together, but had been careful to keep savage elephants as far apart as possible at each camp site. Their efforts were defeated when Poo Thong Bow and his arch enemy Poo Ek Sri Wong worked their way from two different creeks one night and met by a waterfall in the Huay Nguia.

Both were elephant killers and the encounter between the larger, two-tusked Poo Thong Bow and his younger, single-tusked rival, must have been an epic struggle, though none was there to witness it. The outcome was that the older animal was sent down the waterfall and found dead in the pool at the bottom next morning, whilst Poo Ek, somewhat battered, was

grazing contentedly nearby with his score at three elephants killed.

Elephants, huge ponderous beasts, are normally extremely careful of their footing. They know that any fall is dangerous, as the crashing impact as their bulk meets the ground almost guarantees breakages of some kind. In a fight, however, animals do get knocked off balance and I felt that this must have happened to Poo Thong Bow at some stage, ensuring ultimate victory to his smaller opponent. Certainly my money would have been on the former in any stand-up fight.

The very size of an elephant made it a difficult patient to treat and if broken bones, particularly leg bones, were involved, the only remedy was shooting. When healthy, an animal would lie down to sleep for only a few hours at a time. If unable to rise through illness, the crushing weight of its own body could cause severe internal injuries. The No. 1 priority therefore with a sick animal was to get it on its feet and keep it there.

To this end man-power, winches and block and tackle were all brought into play but one had generally to call up tuskers to complete the job. These animals, levering with their tusks under the prone animal's body, brought the sick beast slowly erect, then buttressed it on both sides against further falls until slings could be fixed round the invalid. The helplessness of such powerful animals when unable to rise by their own efforts and the gentleness of the assisting tuskers is a sight that makes a lasting impression.

Having seen that all camps were in position I sat in my bungalow, many miles upriver from wife and family, and prepared to wait and pray for early rains. After three dry years, relatively speaking only, they arrived right on time and did us proud.

Violent storms flashed and rumbled round the hills for some days and high winds rocked the jungle to herald the deluge. Finally the downpour arrived, drumming on the parched forest and bouncing high off the baked earth.

For a while the ground was busy soaking up moisture like a sponge but, slowly at first, then with ever-increasing speed, the side-streams started to rise and feed the parent river. The Me Tun crept over its sandbars and islands. Logs started lifting and bumping on the bars, then floated off into deeper water to join other thousands already on the move and our struggle to keep them moving had started.

At almost every bend and rapid they started piling up and elephant parties were moved round constantly to open log jams. It was in work of this sort that the elephantine strength and intelligence was best displayed, making the hundredth or thousandth spectacle as interesting as the first.

Each stack was approached from the down-river side to start the search for the key log holding back the main mass. Elephants moved up cautiously testing each foothold and exploring the river bed ahead with probing trunks. Under the smooth surface water lay rocks, sunken trees and obstacles of all kinds and the animals seemed to make a mental map of such snags against the time when they had to make a hurried dash from in front of a dissolving stack. They moved with agonizing slowness but having seen the uncovered rocks at low water one could only wonder that they moved at all.

Once at the stack they were directed to removing logs and could tell in advance when a parcel of logs would break away by the changing pressures and stresses on the logs they were handling. I would hesitate to support the claim that elephants can pick out the key log of any stack unaided, but feel convinced that some of the animals knew much more about the work in hand than their Karen mahouts who were out of their element in the water.

Some animals would bellow in protest on being directed to remove an obviously immovable log; others refused to move if their chains had been left dragging in the water by a careless mahout, knowing full well that a sudden dash brought to a halt in the path of oncoming logs by a chain snagged to the bottom could be a serious matter. Years earlier one of our tuskers had been anchored by his tying chain in a rising river and been completely submerged except for his trunk which stuck up like a breathing periscope. His self control in not panicking during the time it took for men to dive and free his chains verged on the supernatural.

Elephants open a stack by curling their trunks around embedded logs, sawing them to and fro to loosen them, then hauling them out with a sideways heave of the head. Tuskers are particularly useful, being able to pincer the logs between tusks and trunk to get a better leverage, but one of our females, not to be outdone, developed a trick of biting small logs in her mouth then heaving with great effect.

Some elephants show no fear of the water, often the otherwise timid females, whilst other normally first-class beasts

cannot be widely used because of an aversion to deep water. During big rises, with logs moving in fleets and armadas down the swollen river, any elephant that will stand out in deep water fending, prodding and urging logs on the way is worth three of its more timid brethren in the shallows.

Planted like a great grey-black boulder, with water creaming off its chest and its huge body inflated with air, as a precaution against a sudden plunge into swimming depth, it makes a noble sight. The huge trunk swings and coils, grips, heaves and grips again as floating clumps of logs are scattered. With an impatient fly-swatting gesture, the massive head deflects logs that would crush a man to jelly, allowing them to slide past its ears, behind which the mahout's legs are sheltering, and along the flanks.

Always from choice it will face upstream into the current ready to fend off floating debris and when compelled to work head down-river, keeps half an eye behind for approaching logs. A solid point-on blow from a log weighing tons is no light matter and anyone who considers elephants are always slow and ponderous should see the speed at which they can turn to meet approaching danger. If the turn is made too late to avoid a log entirely it may be passed under a raised hind leg or depressed by the trunk and then passed right under the body to pop up again on the other side.

Whatever the scientific placing of elephants in the intelligence scale, I shall always feel that they deserve a special rating. Not because of their undignified antics in circuses, where only the smaller females appear, or because of any marked ability in specified tests, but rather do I believe it as the result of hundreds of hours spent watching their everyday activities when they supported my belief many times.

To cite but a few examples, which I have seen frequently, in support of my opinion; leafy branches are used as fans, stones are picked up and hurled at dogs, balls of tamarind are opened and the bitter medicine extracted before the titbit is eaten. These are not tricks used to impress an audience but effective gestures made to deal with various situations.

Considering the weird shape and vast size of the animal, not greatly modified from that of its pre-historic ancestor, the Hairy Mammoth, one can only marvel at the close parallel between its working life span and that of man.

Allowing for a longer gestation period—twenty-two months as compared with nine—an elephant starts “school” at five

years old and undergoes progressive training until the age of sixteen when it starts work. It graduates to the heaviest work at the age of twenty-five and from then to its forty-fifth year is in its working prime. Between the forty-fifth and fifty-fifth years it is as strong as ever but slowing down and at the age of sixty it is considered an old elephant meriting lighter work. At sixty-five it is considered a "pensioner" on almost permanent rest and usually dies before reaching seventy.

One frequently came across strong bonds of affection between elephant and rider. Particularly do I recall that of Nai Tar Pom Kam and Mc Nang, a partnership of sixteen years' standing. A day came when at the age of sixty, with arthritis in his knees, Nai Tar was no longer able to climb on to the old lady's head and his dismay on being told that someone else would have to ride his beloved animal (he always considered it his animal rather than a Company one) was touching. A promise that he could stay on as camp cook to be near Mc Nang and could pick the new rider for her finally calmed his fears.

After making a two weeks' round trip of all camps on the upper river I returned to Oom Warb bungalow and came across Morwyn some distance outside camp following the trail of migrating ants. These had the same fascination for both of us; their countless numbers, seemingly endless activity and the singleness of purpose which they showed in moving large obstacles stimulated our interest, and we had no lack of raw material for study!

The carotty red ant with the fiery sting which wove nests of leaves, the termites which made large conical earth domes in the forest, the small black ants which invaded everywhere and stung like demons, and many more; all of them used our bungalow as a highway.

Only the black one—literally our *bête noire*—stayed for any length of time and was a most unwelcome visitor with a passion for sugar and an apparent immunity to D.D.T. These creatures moved in columns and were, I think, a type of soldier ant. On occasion they drove us out of bed whilst they marched in never-ending line through the sheets and we were reduced to seeing out the night in deckchairs.

The bungalow was also a happy hunting ground for other livestock; tokay and chingchok lizards in the roof and the odd snake which preyed on them, and a rat in the bathroom. This latter carried off tablets of soap so often that we suspected the boy of stealing, but when a pair of ladies' unmentionables also

disappeared, we found it hard to blame him. The culprit was finally driven out from under the floor.

The major hazard in the early stages however was a legion of scorpions and centipedes—both capable of giving adults severe pain and of being really dangerous to a small child. Ceaseless vigilance was kept on Richard's movements but after finding him playing happily in his pen almost sitting on a scorpion and then finding another in bed with him, we got worried and imported a pressure sprayer. The whole house was drenched with insecticide and the numbers of scorpions which crept out of crevices to die appalled us, but we were almost free of the nuisance thereafter.

The catering side of our establishment was also not without its hazards. We had an assured supply of chicken but otherwise the meat position was none too good. Occasionally legs of venison filtered into the kitchen but red meat was hard to come by, and when a herd of bullocks arrived one day, on their way to be sold at a distant town, they were eagerly snapped up so that we became the proud owners of fourteen scraggy cattle.

Proud but somewhat apprehensive owners; the local tigress had discovered what easy meals the village cattle provided, and had accounted for a score of animals from Oom Warb village and six Company transport ponies during the previous two years. She covered a wide range and had savaged a Company tusker in the rapids about the time we bought our bulls. She came upon him asleep and got in a few hearty slashes before Poo Jack awoke sufficiently to drive her off.

It was with great relief that we heard of her death; a Company employee, a man of great hunting prowess, came upon the tiger by surprise one morning whilst she was eating a newly-killed wild pig and shot her through the head without delay. We felt that our meat supply was safe at last, but some time later one of our bullocks went amissing and after a search the gardener came in to say that a tiger had got it, producing the severed head as evidence. It seemed that some enterprising beast, maybe a grown cub of the tigress, had lost no time in annexing the well-stocked Oom Warb beat.

Chickens too were always vanishing. Kay, at one stage, wrote to say that a hen was killing his cocks. This puzzling news seemed to prove the old adage that "the female of the species is more deadly than the male", until a further note said that the beast had been caught in a snare. The missing inverted commas then fell into place—"hen", meaning jungle cat.

One of our best Leghorn cocks vanished and when taxed the gardener said it had died of sickness and been buried a week before. "Buried in your stomach", I thought and told him to unearth the remains. Some hard digging in a patch of earth chosen at random failed to impress me and eventually the gardener had to say, "Nai, I am a fool. I have just remembered that I threw it in the river." To save his face this patent untruth was accepted and the price of one bird chopped off his pay. Within days he was back with a beautiful Leghorn, the twin of the missing bird. I daren't ask where he got it, but agreed to call the incident closed.

Nai Boon Low, our supervisor, also suffered when a small python wound its way into his chicken house one night, swallowed several birds and then was too thick to get out through the bars. The noise from terrified hens wakened the camp and one python received a thorough clubbing after which it was sliced open and the newly dead fowls removed for later consumption! Despite its injuries the snake had crawled away and vanished by morning.

Though my jungle life at this period was much fuller of domestic detail than of yore it was also much more enjoyable. My good fortune was in having a delightful companion who took everything in her stride and adapted herself to the forest life in a way that few women could have equalled. I was very proud of her.

I was never an advocate of hardship for its own sake, though as a bachelor one tended to let things slide, and revelled in the improved cuisine. No longer could the cook serve half raw meals and go unchastised. His cooking was encouraged from the greasy spoon stage to the Cordon Bleu (Jungle Grade) and unheard of delicacies like chicken fricassee, fillet steaks, roast pork and pseudo apple sauce, cakes and biscuits came off the production lines freely.

Inspections were the order of every working day and as the rains continued more and more logs floated into the lower river below Oom Warb, so that visits to the Sathorn rapids became more frequent. This rapid, the last barrier before our timber reached the Me Ping River, is probably the largest single rapid in the whole country and was for many years considered impassable to floating logs. So much so that the old timers had blasted a drag path through solid rock to take our logs round it.

We felt that logs could be floated through, given a few generous rises, and decided to make the effort; many gloomy

forecasts were made, notably by Corporation men who said it would take us ten years to do the job, and great was our professional satisfaction in confounding them utterly.

This sunless gorge was a place of danger and menace during the rains and not for all the tea in China would I have sat on an elephant's head in the noise and fury of it all. The men and elephants also hated it but performed great deeds none the less. The courage and fatalism (maybe the two were linked) with which the men tackled log jams was beyond praise. Not once, but several times a day, and every day for months, they took risks that knotted my stomach as I waited for a mishap. And took them moreover with nonchalance, even though knowing full well that one slip might be fatal. They may have lacked many of the civilized virtues, but bravery they had in full measure and my hat is off to them.

The procedure of opening stacks there differed rather, since an elephant could not reach much of the timber; one slip from a house-sized boulder would have landed it in twenty feet of raging water. Wire ropes were attached by man-power, then coupled to the elephant dragging gear so that an animal could use the rock-strewn bank as a tow path.

We had mishaps, many of them, but miraculously none proved fatal.

Poo Tar Dam (Mr. Black Eyes) did, in fact, step off a house-sized boulder and was overturned like a child's toy. He did two somersaults in the foam, shedding all his harness and chains, but the gods were with him. After his second roll he was right way up, body inflated and heavy legs stabilizing him as he headed for the bank, swimming high then low in the water like a porpoise. He made a rocky landing and clambered out apparently none the worse, but shaking so violently that I expected him to collapse.

Throughout it all Nai Sing, the mahout, had clung like a leech to the elephant's ears and rolled along with his animal. He was badly gashed where one of the flying chains had stroked his back, but was thankful enough to be alive. If he had let go he would have died for certain. He just fainted away when helped down from Poo Tar Dam's back and I didn't blame him a bit. He must have had a glimpse of eternity and probably felt to be living on borrowed time.

Both were sent away for a long rest and, at time of writing, their partnership continues into its eighth year.

Next Nai Tooie, the senior headman in charge of the Sathorn

operation, was almost decapitated. He was standing alongside a wire cable, fast to a jammed log at one end and a straining elephant at the other, when it snapped. One flying rope-end of frayed steel filaments whistled past his chin at lightning speed and, though barely touching him, knocked out several front teeth and dislocated his jaw. A fraction lower and nearer would have sent his head rolling.

Poo Kam Pan, the elephant applying the pressure, shot forward under the released tension and squarely into a boulder which cracked an inch or two from the end of one tusk, causing him to add a high-pitched trumpet blast to the general uproar.

Then Nai Inkam, an excellent headman, diced with death and, against all the odds, stayed alive. He and another man had walked out along a large log stuck square across the current and with water whipping round their knees, they were trying to fix a wire rope to a clump of jammed logs. Just gazing at the water flying past made one dizzy and I had given firm orders that all men working in mid-stream were to be roped to a helper on the bank in case they were washed away. Inkam and his assistant had been too lazy to encumber themselves with a lifeline and whilst bending to attach the wire went dizzy watching the bubbles speeding past their legs.

Then followed a dance, as they hopped around trying to keep balance, which would have been hilarious had their situation not been so serious. If the combined wills of all the rigidly staring men along the bank had been obeyed they would have been safe, but vertigo carried the day.

Both toppled in and vanished. No one present ever expected to see either man alive again. Just to confound us a clawing pair of hands appeared almost at once, hooked themselves over a slippery wet log and, slowly, ever so slowly, hauled a spluttering figure back on to the log it had left seconds before. The man, Nai Warn, was so shocked that he daren't stand up for fear of falling in again and lay half awash across the log, until a second man, well roped, was sent to assist him to the bank.

Of Inkam there was no sign. He had gone under the stacked timber and, thinking of the jagged river bed, I held not the slightest hope. Then a shout from a coolie downstream roused us all to study what seemed like a water-logged piece of timber a good hundred yards below. It waved an arm feebly and after a struggle a long bamboo pole was hooked into his clothing to enable us to fish near-dead Inkam ashore. He had a tremen-

dous gash near his eye, but his water-filled lungs demanded first attention. After a period of strenuous and none too expert artificial respiration we were rewarded by some heartening groans and when the headman could lift a gory head his first words, repeated a dozen times like a chorus, were, "Pom my ty? — "I'm not dead?" All I could say was, "No, but you'll never be closer."

Such incidents, interspersed amongst uneventful periods, were the warp and woof making up the whole cloth of a forest life and through rough and smooth the work of moving the timber went on until early September.

Then the rains reached a peak and halted all activity for some days; throughout one sullen day the yellow tide crept up and up until at midnight, by torchlight, we saw the top of the ten-foot measuring post disappear under water. The two boats were already bumping on the river bed, having been tied by too short ropes which pulled them under. Working camps were moved away from the river banks to guard against a similar type of catastrophe as had occurred twenty years earlier just below Oom Warb, but which still remained evergreen in local memory.

On that occasion an elephant working party of seventeen men were camped in the bed of a small, dry, sandy side-stream just at its junction with the Me Tun River. They were peacefully sleeping through a wet night when a cloudburst hit the headwaters of their small creek and bore downwards in a solid wall of water to drown and bury sixteen of them with almost no warning. Most of the men probably never knew what hit them.

The one remaining man, some distance away in the jungle obeying the call of nature, heard the roar of fast approaching water above the sound of beating rain and dashed back to warn his colleagues. The bank-high torrent reached the camp first, sweeping through in a fury to carry the sleeping men out into the Me Tun creek and certain death.

Almost demented with fright the sole survivor dashed through the dark jungle, a sure indication as to the size of his terror, to sound the alarm and arrived in Oom Warb village in a state of collapse. His sensational and disjointed story left the villagers sceptical; they thought he was mad, but a search party next day proved, sadly, that the news was all too true.

On the same rise that sank our boats some fifteen thousand teak logs slipped through the Sathorn like so many salmon heading for the sea then, ironically, having had an easy passage

high above the jagged Sathorn rocks, they piled up in one colossal jam against the midstream pillar of rock guarding the exit of the Me Tun.

Elephant camps were sent down to deal with the stack, half a mile long and blocking the river solidly from bank to bank. Almost at once angry villagers began pouring in with heavy claims for crop damage. The lower Me Tun was so rock-ribbed and steep that elephants could only graze along the river banks, which were dotted with gardens. Our animals lost no time at all in smashing fences to raid the succulent vegetation and after one particularly bitter haggle over claims I protested that it would be cheaper if I bought the whole crop and gave it to the elephants.

This cynical remark was taken at its face value by many villagers so that, hardly knowing how it came about, I found myself doing exactly that. What the villagers had not allowed for was the fact that an elephant, though it eats a lot and damages twice as much again, eats selectively with the result that our working camps lived royally on the produce not fancied by the elephants.

Work continued apace until November then, with the bottom falling out of the river, the Me Tun became too shallow to float our logs. The elephants then moved on to easier work; straightening the ten thousand logs still lying in the creek in a herring-bone pattern so that the timber would start moving easily on the first waters of the next wet monsoon.

In mid-November there was great activity in and around the village temple. Everyone was preparing for the Loi Katong festival, and, though this festival savoured more of Animism than Buddhism, it was made the occasion of merit-making visits to the temple where offerings of food and money were made to the priests.

Loi Katong, meaning Floating the Boat (a small banana leaf craft bearing a candle amidships like a mast), was a yearly event largely confined to the northern Lao provinces of Siam. On the night of the full moon each villager lit the candle in his boat, launched it and watched it drift away on the current, carrying, so was the old belief, all the crimes he had committed during the year just past. He could then face the next year without the heavy burden of his misdeeds weighing on his conscience.

The sight of hundreds of twinkling candles dotting the black surface of the water, as the boats drifted silently down and away

out of sight round a bend in the river, was a moving and beautiful one. Some boats, badly made ones, sank soon after launching and the owner of such a craft came in for much teasing. It was declared that his sins had been too heavy for the boat to carry and there was ribald speculation as to the nature of his misdeeds.

Nai Deng, a known timber thief, launched his boat and it sank like a stone. This was acclaimed as a just reward, but Deng disputed the verdict hotly and hared off to return with another boat, so seaworthy that it would have required rifle fire to sink it. He had no intention of shouldering his misdeeds longer than necessary and sped his unsinkable craft away without delay.

The servants had made Richard a boat, the biggest in sight, and strewn it with paper flags sufficient for an admiral's barge. This craft was so heavily charged with candles that it went up in flames out in mid-river, causing our small boy to dance with distress and excitement as he saw the fate of his colourful vessel.

The Loi Katong ceremony, a very old one, has survived more as a pleasant custom than as a religious belief, but it was plain to see that many people, particularly in country districts, more than half believe in it still.

Shortly after this we made a long planned pilgrimage to the meditation hut of a religious hermit. His tiny bamboo shack was perched on a lofty pinnacle at the mercy of every wind that blew and it was his practice to live up there nine months of the year meditating and living a life of spartan self-denial. He was completely dependent on the benevolence of villagers for his food and water, and a twisting brown track up the face of the hill showed how they had delivered the bare necessities of life to him.

Morwyn and I struggled up the weathered track only to find on arrival that the priest was away on his three-month vacation but even so we were able to look around his quarters. The small hut, the floor being the size of a large table top, was fully furnished by the hermit's standard and contained so little that one might well have imagined it abandoned. In front of his dwelling was a tiny pagoda and to one side a sickly Bo tree sapling (*Ficus religiosa*), the tree under which Gautama Buddha reputedly sat, struggling to stay alive in that barren spot.

The view, over miles of rolling jungle, rice plains and rivers glittering like silver bands in the sunlight, was superb. We could see ant-sized villagers harvesting the golden rice and pygmy-sized elephants dragging timber in the river hundreds of feet

below and were able to feel an Olympian detachment about it all. Probably a frame of mind which the religious hermit found very conducive to his meditations.

We gazed our fill then scrambled down into the valley where my Olympian composure was shattered as soon as I reached camp. Nai Chur, a junior headman, was wringing his hands at the door of our bungalow and wasted no time in spreading the bad news. Me Kee Poom had been stolen by a band of five Karens and was being forced-marched towards Burma. The thieves in their haste had stolen the poorest elephant in our herd and it was felt that she would be too tired to stand much forced travelling.

With this in mind a strong party, with police reinforcements, was sent hotfoot in pursuit but ran into a united front of Karen liars who, rather than see their clansmen arrested, provided detailed and highly inaccurate information as to the animal's whereabouts.

In the course of one day she had been seen running north, strolling south, grazing westwards, sometimes alone, sometimes surrounded by armed men, and after our party had sorted the grain of truth from the chaff of lies, they had been outdistanced. When they finally got on the trail they travelled it hard only to run up against that invisible but impassable barrier, the Burma border.

Somewhere not far across it the thieves were thumbing their noses at our efforts and, through friends in their home village, sent word that they would ransom the elephant for one hundred and fifty pounds. This sum, a fortune in the eyes of the thieves, was one we might grudgingly have paid to recover a first-class animal, but Me Kee Poom was distinctly tenth rate and the thieves were considerably shocked to learn that we wouldn't pay a halfpenny for her return.

They were told that they could either return our elephant forthwith and we would call the matter closed or that they could keep it and in this event we would lodge their names with the police and make it hot for them if they were ever seen to set foot in Siam again. They kept the elephant and stayed put so that, with the earlier theft of Me Parn, we were two elephants to the bad in one year.

Nature redressed the balance somewhat when Me Boon Mee and Me Nullah each presented us with a fine calf at short notice. The Karens with their preference for female elephants and passion for calves soon heard about this double event and

began to appear with some fine tuskers to try for an exchange. A mother elephant with calf was almost useless for the type of river work we were handling in the Mc Tun—the calf was for ever staging mock panics in the water which put the mother in a fine state of nerves as she tried to prevent her horrible child from drowning—and we were only too pleased to come to terms.

Me Nullah, the unpredictable, behaved perfectly under trial and the Karen who wanted her was delighted to take possession in exchange for a fine tusker. Little could he guess what shocks she would provide him with ere long, but, to be sure, the shocks were not all on his side. He had omitted to tell us that his tusker was fierce with men. We found out the hard way when, but for some timely spear work, Poo Boon Mee would have trampled a workman flat.

Me Boon Mee and calf went in fair exchange for Poo Boon Low, and with two new elephants in our herd we had to do a rush job of branding before the hovering thieves could "borrow" them for more ransom.

The two animals were marched into the river and scrubbed until purple-black, then the first one was brought up to me and made to present an elephantine rump. From a vantage point atop a log I quickly daubed on the Company N brand then sent him away to let twenty minutes of afternoon sun activate the acid paste whilst the second one came up and received similar treatment.

Before their waiting time was up both animals were restive and trying to free their imprisoned tails to fan the irritation. The pain must have been considerable but, since a good brand mark would be their greatest safeguard against theft and ill-treatment in years to come, they were made to sweat out a full twenty minutes.

Then they were thoroughly washed down and the brand area thickly smeared with fly repellent ointment. As Nos. 902 and 903 they had become the newest members of the Company elephant herd and were soon showing the yellow scarred N for all to see.

December came and we marched out of the forest to have two weeks of Christmas celebrations amongst our many good friends in Chiengmai, then back we trudged in January to our sylvan retreat to start closing down the work for another year.

By early March all the elephants had been dispersed in

groups amongst the lush green headwaters of several creeks and, after a period of inspection trips along the main river I, plus family, went to visit them for the very last time. We moved from one rest camp area to the next at leisurely pace and at each stop pitched our tents conveniently near to the site chosen for doctoring the animals.

I did not relish having elephants breaking free from an inoculation site at any time and, with my family housed in a fragile tent nearby, took no chances. The reasonably safe method of tying each animal to a tree during "jabbing" was discarded for the wholly safe method of "crushing".

A crush is a wedge-shaped stockade with the apex hard against some convenient tree and the wide base open to allow an elephant to enter. The animal is normally shy of entering such a constricted space but lavish bribes of banana fronds and other titbits, coupled with strong urgings from the mahout on its head, usually achieved the desired result. Once in, it is securely imprisoned by heavy saplings barring the exit at the rear.

Quite often the awareness of this close confinement provokes a rare display of temper with all the animal's vast strength concentrated in an attempt to shatter the stockade. However, once it realizes that the tremendously strong wooden pen is escape-proof, it usually calms down and the mahout, who had left the animal's head in a hurry when the trouble started, is able to climb aboard to soothe his charge ready for the pin-prick of inoculation.

With the animal "crushed", and an experienced elephant staff assisting, the work was simple. In fact Morwyn could have done it had I allowed her to try.

After each animal had received its yearly dose of serum it was marched away, disappearing into the encroaching jungle with the characteristic lurch and sway of vast hindquarters, and I felt distinctly sad that I should never be seeing any of these magnificent animals again.

On forested hills, in steamy valleys and swampy lowlands, in extremes of heat, wet and cold, and at all times of day and night I had come to know Indian elephants for what they are—the unquestioned Kings and Queens of the Jungle.

However my seven years' sojourn with the royalty of the animal kingdom was almost at an end. By mid-March the last camps had been visited, the last elephant doctored and sent away into the depths of the jungle and, for the last time, I

turned to leave the unchanging jungle for the everchanging haunts of man.

I carried with me the satisfaction of having performed a big job to the best of my ability, the best wishes of the working staff (maybe the elephants, too !) and sufficient memories of distant places, strange customs and exciting incidents to last a lifetime.

## GLOSSARY OF SIAMESE WORDS

<i>aung</i>	to push with the head. An action performed by elephants in moving teak logs.
<i>ban</i>	village.
<i>chang</i>	(Siamese) elephant.
<i>doi</i>	hill.
<i>fai</i>	spiked bamboo irrigation dam.
<i>farang</i>	foreigner. An abbreviation of the word "Farangset", meaning Frenchman.
<i>Haw</i>	Yunnanese tribe.
<i>hen</i>	jungle cat.
<i>huay</i>	small stream.
<i>kai</i>	fever.
<i>Kamoo</i>	Indo-Chinese jungle tribe.
<i>Karen</i>	A hill tribe, migrants from Burma, who occupy the western hill country in Siam.
<i>kashaw</i>	(Karen) elephant.
<i>keng</i>	rapid.
<i>Kua Mar Bar</i>	Mad Dog Creeper—a soapy creeper used for scrubbing the elephants' hides.
<i>Lao</i>	Northern Siamese people—cousins of the Laos from the Indo-Chinese state of Laos.
<i>lieng pee</i>	spirit money.
<i>lom</i>	wind.
<i>mai</i>	timber, e.g. Mai Sang (bamboo).
<i>Mai Paw</i>	Paw tree. The soft inner bark was used for harness making.
<i>Me</i>	(literally Mother), e.g. Me (Nam) Ping—Mother of the waters of Ping or Ping river. Me Nullah—Mrs. Nullah.
<i>Meeow</i>	a hill tribe.
<i>mep</i>	sit.
<i>Me pen yang</i>	"Never mind".
<i>Mooser</i>	a hill tribe, migrants from southern China.
<i>Nai</i>	Mr. or Master.
<i>pang</i>	camp.
<i>Poo</i>	father, or indicates male gender; e.g. Poo Ek Kam Sein—Mr. Single Tusked Golden Warrior.
<i>Shan</i>	Northern Burmese tribe.
<i>swai</i>	shake the head. An action performed by elephants to throw off the rider.
<i>tart</i>	waterfall.
<i>Tical</i>	Unit of Siamese currency. £1 sterling = 55-60 Ticals.
<i>wai</i>	a gesture of greeting with hands in a praying position below the chin.
<i>Wat</i>	Temple.

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